# BRILL'S STUDIES

## IN

# INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

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VOLUME 35

# THE POLITICS OF SKEPTICISM
## IN THE ANCIENTS,
# MONTAIGNE, HUME, AND KANT

BY

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INTRODUCTION

# SKEPTICISM AND POLITICS

Claims to *know* something are ubiquitous in politics and govern-
ment. Among other purposes, such claims are used on the one hand
to support positions, policies, and personalities, and on the other
hand to undermine institutions, ideologies, and particular indiv-
iduals. One time-honored way of fighting such claims has been to
draw attention to the philosophical problems associated with any
claim to knowledge. A major source of such problems has been the
various skeptical traditions. This is a book about the relationship
between certain important skeptical traditions and politics.

Skepticism is widely understood to entail doubt, distrust, crit-
icism, a negative attitude, and especially religious unbelief and
atheism. It is sometimes treated as a timeless perspective that needs
no historical or philosophical analysis and is immediately obvious
to anyone who uses the language. But it turns out that there has
been an identifiable and vigorous set of closely related traditions of
skepticism throughout the history of ideas that merits consideration
as skepticism properly understood. It should be clear from the
outset that this book is about certain historical traditions of
skepticism, and not about every conceivable skepticism. Although
these traditions have been closely associated with the history of
philosophy, it is not quite accurate to characterize most of them as
philosophical skepticism because on most interpretations these
traditions were more anti-philosophical than philosophical.

The historical traditions of skepticism have been traced to the
beginnings of recorded Western culture in figures such as Homer
and Heraclitus. Socrates and Pyrrho of Elis are credited with giving
the two major traditions the recognizable form that they bore down
to the modern age. Our chief sources for the ancient Greek and
Roman flowering of these traditions are the works of Cicero, Sextus
Empiricus, and Diogenes Laertius. We also know of them from the
Church Fathers. Lactantius and Eusebius wrote against versions of
the traditions, and Augustine devoted his earliest extant work to a
refutation of one of them.

A huge scholarly literature about ancient skepticism has developed

in many languages and especially during the last decades.[1] Almost all of this literature is philological or philosophical in the narrower sense. Although some scholars have ventured thoughtful and provocative remarks about the political implications of ancient skepticism, there has been a dearth of sustained or systematic attention to them.

The Greek and Roman traditions were virtually forgotten during the Middle Ages but rediscovered and rejuvenated during the Renaissance. Here again, a large scholarly literature has traced the development of the traditions from early figures such as Erasmus and Pico della Mirandola to Emerson and Kierkegaard.[2] Recent work has characterized figures such as Hobbes, Rousseau, and Adam Smith, who might not earlier have been seen as such, as skeptics; and shown how indebted anti-skeptics such as Leibniz and Hegel were to the traditions of skepticism for challenge and inspiration.[3] There is something of a cottage industry in journals of philosophy as scholars compete to demonstrate the skeptical or anti-

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[1] A number of extensive bibliographies to this literature are available. See Giannantoni, ed., *Lo scetticismo antico*, vol. 2, pp. 753 ff.; Long and Sedley, eds., *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 2, pp. 476 ff. For more recent work, see Voelke, ed., *Le scepticisme antique: Perspectives historiques et systématiques* and the third edition of Dal Pra, *Lo scetticismo greco*, with updated bibliography.

[2] Perhaps the most influential pioneering work in this field was Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, revised and reissued as The *History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*. See also Popkin's *High Road to Pyrrhonism*, eds. Watson and Force, and *The Third Force in Seventeenth Century Thought*. Also widely influential has been the work of Charles B. Schmitt, including *Cicero Scepticus: A Study of the Influence of the Academica in the Renaissance*. A useful collection covering figures from the ancients to Kant is Burnyeat, ed., *The Skeptical Tradition*. On Emerson, see Michael, *Emerson and Skepticism*. For a wide-ranging review in French, see Dumont, *Le scepticisme et le phénomène*; and in Italian, Paganini, *Scepsi moderna: Interpretazioni dello scetticismo da Charron a Hume*. Other significant works will be cited in footnotes below.

[3] See, for example, Tuck, "Optics and sceptics: the philosophical foundations of Hobbes's political thought" and *Hobbes*; Missner, "Skepticism and Hobbes's Political Philosophy"; Olaso, "The Two Scepticisms of the Savoyard Vicar"; Cremaschi, "Adam Smith: Skeptical Newtonianism, Disenchanted Republicanism, and the Birth of Social Science"; Olaso, "Leibniz and Scepticism"; Forster, *Hegel and Skepticism*.

skeptical credentials of philosophers.[4] But with only a few exceptions this literature also has by and large neglected the political dimension.

Contemporary moral and political philosophers often draw on the thinkers of the skeptical traditions. Writers in English such as John Rawls, Onora O'Neill, Judith Shklar, Stanley Cavell, and Stephen Toulmin; Frenchmen such as Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze; Italians such as Gianni Vattimo; and writers in German such as Otfried Höffe and Jürgen Habermas agree with Montaigne or draw on Hume or Kant. But even when they recognize that the writer who inspires them was in some sense a skeptic, they rarely explore the larger context of that thinker in the traditions of skepticism, and rarely draw close connections between those traditions and their own work.

This book is designed to fill some of the lacunae identified above. It explores the political implications of the ideas of some of the chief figures in the historical traditions of skepticism. It begins with the ancient skeptics and proceeds to a study of three early modern thinkers: Montaigne, Hume, and Kant. The following sections introduce the problems and the figures that are the subject of this book.

## 1. *Epistemology and politics*

Epistemology is the term used to describe the theory of knowledge. Epistemology tells us who can know, and when, how, and what they can know. It is one of the central branches of modern academic philosophy. Whether one recognizes it or not, one relies on an epistemology if one claims to know anything.

Epistemological theories have traditionally divided claims concerning knowledge into two categories. Claims to know something are dogmatic claims, and those who assert such claims are dogmatists. Doubts about knowledge are skeptical claims, and those who doubt that they or anyone else can know anything are skeptics. Complications arise if skeptics claim that they know that nothing can be known; then they are properly considered dogmatic skeptics.

The political stances of dogmatists usually follow in one way or another from their knowledge. To take salient Western examples,

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[4] To take only a recent crop, see Breazeale, "Fichte on Skepticism" and Olshewsky, "The Classical Roots of Hume's Skepticism".

some political thinkers have drawn on Platonic ideas for their political philosophy. Some Western political thinkers and political actors have taken their cues from natural law; others take them from Judaism or Christianity or Islam; some take them from the "sciences" of Marxism or other branches of economics. In these cases, the truths of their dogmas guide their politics.

It is fundamental to the nature of the traditions of skepticism that they do not entail any one set of political implications. Critics of skepticism have sometimes accused it of direct responsibility for specific political disasters, such as Law's Mississippi fiasco and the South Sea Bubble in the eighteenth century.[5] But they have read into the traditions more than anything that has ever been claimed for the traditions by their own proponents. That is because skepticism has been more of a negative critique of claims to knowledge than of a claim in its own right. Skepticism clears away the undergrowth of dogmatic truth, but does not furnish any substitute that can provide strict and logically entailed guidelines for political life in their place.

This does not mean that skepticism provides no guidance for politics at all. We shall see that some ancient skeptics reported that they followed certain rules of living in the absence of truths, and that these rules have implications for politics. The ancient skeptics were not claiming that they knew that these rules should be followed, but simply that in fact this is what they found themselves doing. Similarly, we shall see that Montaigne and Hume came up with strongly held political positions, subject to the proviso that they could not claim that they absolutely, positively, *knew* that such positions were what politics should be like, to the exclusion of any alternatives. Kant knew certain things, but in politics he often had no more than justified beliefs.

Skeptics are commonly accused of promoting nihilism or quietistic conservatism.[6] The argument is that if they know nothing, they have no basis for involvement in politics at all, or no basis for criticizing the status quo. Throughout this volume, we will see that this is by no means the case. Politics does not by its very nature

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[5] See Crousaz, *Examen du Pyrrhonisme,* Preface, p. 3, also cited in Popkin, "Scepticism in the Enlightenment", pp. 1328-9.

[6] See, e.g., Hiley, *Philosophy in Question: Essays on a Pyrrhonian Theme.*

require knowledge, and the skeptics were perfectly capable of getting along in politics without it. If on the one hand skeptics could not challenge the status quo on the basis of knowledge, on the other hand they had no reason to accept its legitimacy on that basis either. In addition, as we shall see, the skeptical reliance on custom is by no means necessarily conservative.

Other commentators, sympathetic to skepticism and to some specific political program, have sometimes tried to tie the two together. One recent writer has reviewed skeptical elements in such diverse thinkers as Maimonides, Machiavelli, Gramsci, Wittgenstein, and Lyotard, and, in each case, concluded with a variation on the theme that if we cannot know anything, we might as well structure "whatever field of action one chooses to engage in along egalitarian, participatory lines".[7] This might well be a salutary practice, but it is a *non sequitur*. This author draws very little connection between the skepticism and the participatory politics that is recommended, leaving one with the impression that the gap from the one to the other is bridged by nothing more than a leap of faith. Rather than an implication of skepticism, it is apparently a manifestation of dogmatism.

The word "politics" is used in this study in broad and varied senses. It refers to a wide variety of attitudes, positions, strategies, and actions concerning government, international relations, and the public realm. It is not limited to organized party politics or to the legislative, judicial, and executive institutions of the modern state. Sometimes it refers to theory and sometimes to practice, which should be clear from the context. We are concerned throughout with the relation between the ideas and practices of the skeptical traditions and the ideas and practices which can be labelled "political" in some sense.

One of the most widespread "answers" to epistemological skepticism is the pragmatic or linguistic answer, which points out that the way we actually use words like "knowledge" and "truth" shows that they only *mean* probable or approximate knowledge or some-

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[7] Botwinick, *Skepticism and Political Participation*, p. 60. In another formulation, Botwinick writes that given skepticism, "it seems plausible to forge the goals of collective action in a shared, participatory setting" (p. 36). But given skepticism, it is equally plausible not to do that. At p. 9, Botwinick admits that his book is intended as a rhetorical argument, not a logical argument.

thing close to the truth without being true absolutely. But this is not an answer to most historical skeptics, partly because they were usually faced with people who *did* claim to have knowledge and truth in a stronger sense. In addition, as we shall see, the case can be made that the pragmatic/linguistic answer to skepticism is actually an acceptance of one form of skepticism. A good number of skeptics trafficked in these pragmatic/linguistic explanations to show how they lived with skepticism.

Epistemological skepticism can also imply moral and religious skepticism. If you cannot know anything about morals or God, you may become skeptical about morals or religion. On the one hand, this is not the only road to amoralism or atheism. You might reach these positions because you think you *know* that morality is bunk and that no God exists, and thus become a dogmatic amoralist or atheist. On the other hand, Pascal and others have turned skepticism about the existence of God into an argument *for* religion. Adam Smith and others have tried to show that morality depends on sense, intuition, or language, whether or not we have any knowledge about it. So epistemological skepticism may or may not lead to moral and religious skepticism. Here, we are concerned above all with epistemological skepticism and only secondarily with moral and religious skepticism when they come up in connection with epistemological skepticism and politics.

## 2. *Skepticism and liberalism*

One purpose of this book is to explore the relationship between skepticism and modern liberalism. The argument is that some strands of liberalism may owe more to the traditions of skepticism than has generally been recognized. The intention is not particularly to claim that this relationship is a good thing, or even that liberalism is a particularly good thing. Rather, it is to show that an historical connection has been overlooked in much of the literature, and that it should be recognized. Then, liberals may want to draw more self-consciously on that connection.

In order to make this case, something must be said to define liberalism. This is no place to get involved in a debate over the metaphysics of liberalism, so all that will be attempted will be a summary of key elements that would probably be widely accepted in a definition of the term.

According to the working definition stipulated here, liberalism is a political practice which commonly includes several or all of the following features. It respects rights of free speech, press, assembly, petition, and religion, of the kind enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. These rights are sometimes characterized in terms of pluralism and toleration. Liberalism also follows the rule of law, as exemplified in the German notion of the *Rechtstaat*, limiting the arbitrary power of government officials. It values individualism and equality, usually above community, and occasionally even to the point of Sicilian anarchy. Other things being equal, it minimizes government involvement in the economy and lives of the people. It usually provides for some amount of private property and a substantial market economy, although this may be compatible with a Scandinavian social welfare state. It includes some form of really representative government and the rule of public opinion, as in most of the countries of Western Europe and North America. And in principle, at least, it opposes violence and war for the sake of booty, glory, and conquest.

Sometimes the foregoing political practices are justified by claims to knowledge. If the truths of nature, religion, or infallible Founding Fathers can be called upon to underwrite these practices, they can be said to have dogmatic foundations. But often they do not. As one recent commentator has remarked, liberalism as a practice came before and has been hardier than the dogmas that seek to justify it.[8] This provides a point of entry for founding liberalism in skepticism. Indeed, the just mentioned commentator writes that the "political Pyrrhonist" may be the best inheritor of the liberal project because "he will not engage in the vain project of constructing a liberal doctrine", but will rather "protect the historical inheritance of liberal practice from the excesses of an inordinate liberal ideology".[9]

[8] Gray, *Liberalisms*, pp. 262-3.

[9] Gray, *Liberalisms*, p. 264. Gray also points out that what he calls "post-Pyrrhonian philosophy (or theorizing)" about liberalism without dogma "would not necessarily be conservative in its impact. In so far as it tended to deflate the ruling fictions, its effect would tend to be subversive rather than conservative" (p. 264). He goes on to observe that the "relationship between this post-liberal [here meaning non-dogmatic] perspective and liberal societies is, as is natural, a dialectical one.

The foregoing view is largely justified by the research reported in this book. It suggests that liberal individualism can be traced to Montaigne, but not because it was Montaigne's dogma or doctrine. It explains how liberal rules of property and respect for public opinion were foreshadowed by Hume, but not because Hume thought they were justified by truth or knowledge. And it explores how freedom of the press and international peace were championed on skeptical grounds by Kant. Each of these figures provided intellectual foundations for liberal practices without relying on liberal dogmas.

There is rather more of a danger of anachronism when speaking of the ancient skeptics and liberalism. The third chapter of this book explores some of the ways in which ancient skepticism provides potential support for modern liberalism, without implying in any sense that the ancient skeptics could have known what liberalism might be or wished to see it happen. In that chapter we shall talk of implications and compatibilities, and the point will be to show that according to a number of interpretations, ancient skepticism and modern liberalism are quite consistent in a number of respects.

## 3. *Ancient skepticism and politics*

Ancient skepticism was characterized by its practitioners as a way of life, but the surviving sources have relatively little to say about politics. This provides us with two challenges. One is that ancient skepticism was more of an anti-philosophy than a philosophy, so that the mere stating of its position involves a paradox. It uses philosophical argument to destroy the arguments of its dogmatic opponents, but it does not wish to substitute its own philosophy, and usually claims that it has no philosophy. As the ancients expressed it, their arguments will purge themselves after they have purged their opponents. But the very description of such a theory encourages objections that it is inconsistent, absurd, or flawed in some other way. The ancients maintained that it was perfectly

The post-liberal perspective may be a critical one in so far as it questions and dissolves many of the pervasive banalities of liberal culture, but it may be conservative inasmuch as it yields a better grasp of the particulars of our traditions" (p. 264).

possible to live this way, and we must try to figure out what they could mean.

The second challenge is to explore what the political implications of ancient skepticism may have been without the benefit of much material from the ancient skeptics that dealt specifically with politics. Partly this is a matter of extrapolating from what they did say, and partly of drawing out the implications for politics of what they said about other issues. The following three chapters each contribute to this project in its own way.

The first chapter introduces the most important ancient skeptical thinkers and provides an overview and synthetic reconstruction of their ideas. It surveys the available evidence and reviews the place of the skeptics in the conventional scholarship on ancient political thought. This chapter also provides a chronology of relevant dates for ancient skepticism, and a brief introduction to the ideas of the chief targets of the skeptics: the Stoics and Epicureans. Finally, it points out that the meaning of almost everything the skeptics said has been much debated, and thus that a full understanding of the possible political meanings of ancient skepticism requires a wide survey of the implications of a variety of different interpretations.

The second chapter provides an inventory of the salient concepts and methods employed by the major figures of the ancient skeptical traditions. It divides them into two categories: the Pyrrhonists and the Academics, and explores the commonalities and differences between Pyrrhonian and Academic politics. This chapter is based largely on the original sources.

The third chapter changes the methodological approach, focusing on a recent debate in the philosophical literature. That debate has centered around the question, "Can the Skeptic Live His Skepticism?". This chapter surveys a representative sample of the interpretations put forth in that debate, subjects them to some criticism, and draws out some of the potential political implications of those interpretations. It rephrases the question as, "Can Skeptics Live a Skeptical Politics?".

## 4. *A Gascon, a Scot, and a Prussian*

The following chapters of the book jump ahead to three early modern figures: Michel de Montaigne of Gascony, David Hume of Scotland, and Immanuel Kant of East Prussia. No claim is intended that

these are the only early modern figures that could profitably have
been included. The claim *is* made that they are three of the most
influential thinkers in the genealogy of modernity and of liberalism,
and on that ground alone worth studying. Most of the readers of this
book will be Montaignians, Humeans, and Kantians, at least in part,
and whether they know it or not.

Each of these figures represents a different language, a different
time, and a different region of Europe, and together they span a
reasonably wide spectrum of the early modern Western experience.
It is worth observing that each of them was a provincial, and yet
each was widely influential. Although this is clearly too small a
sample for any firm conclusions, it may be that the observer from
the periphery is in some way more independent, more likely to see
clearly to the heart of the problems of an era, than the metropolitan
figure. Perhaps the outsider, the provincial, is also more likely to
be skeptical of the reigning truths emanating from the center.

We have already briefly mentioned the roots of liberalism in these
figures. Much the same can be said for modernity as a whole. These
three figures account for much of the modern way of thinking.
Montaigne, for example, is justly considered one of the founding
fathers of modern individualism. Large claims can be made for his
role in the forging of French culture as a whole. A study of the role
of skepticism in French political thought as a whole would require
at the very least a substantial treatment of Mersenne, Gassendi,
Naudé, La Mothe Le Vayer, Pascal, Descartes, Nicole, La Bruyère,
Bayle, and others from the seventeenth century; of Montesquieu,
Diderot, Voltaire, and Rousseau from the eighteenth; of Saint
Simon from the nineteenth; and of Proust from the twentieth cen-
tury. But one thing can be said about them that cannot be said about
Montaigne. They all owed much to Montaigne for everything from
ideas and inspiration to literary structure and style. A good part of
what it means to be French is to have read and absorbed Montaigne.

Similar things can be said for Hume and Anglo-Scottish culture.
We could go back before Hume to figures such as Bacon or the
thinkers of the Royal Society for the roots of the modern scientific
attitude, and any full study of the influence of skepticism on British
political thought would require such a move. But even much later
at the height of the tide of positivism in the 1930's and 1940's,
Hume was the hero. His modernization of empiricism has been
widely recognized, and he has been considered the breakthrough

figure in this tradition. He was one of the first to conscientiously attempt to apply the scientific method to social and political studies. This would be enough to justify his inclusion here as a representative figure, but there are more reasons. In stark contrast to Bacon, Newton and the Royal Society, and figures such as Locke, Hume was a secularizer, and thus at the roots of modern secular trends. He was one of the first to study economics in the modern sense, and as such a major influence on Adam Smith. Again, hardly a single major British author on politics since Hume was not indebted to this Scottish man of letters.

And very few German-speakers would argue with the claim that there is no better candidate for the title of father of modern German political thought than Immanuel Kant. This is not to say by any means that German-speakers have always followed Kantian ideals, but rather to say that these ideals have pervaded the modern German intellectual consciousness. And Kantianism is one of the few German ways of thinking that have been successfully exported to other lands. On almost every account, we owe a great deal of modern universalist and deontological ethics and liberal politics to Kant, and recent non-German political philosophers of wide range and influence such as John Rawls, Alan Gewirth, Onora O'Neill, Gianni Vattimo, Jean-François Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze acknowledge their debts to him explicitly.[10]

In chapter four below, Montaigne is placed as a skeptic in the Hellenistic tradition. His attitudes toward Pyrrho and Socrates, toward *epochē* and *ataraxia*, and toward dogmatic rhetoric are explored. A consistent picture of a life according to the skeptical rules of living emerges, and its political implications are laid out. It also becomes clear that Montaigne was no slavish imitator of the ancient skeptics. He developed the ancient traditions into a recognizably modern way of living and of thinking about and participating in politics.

Chapter five assesses Montaigne's politics in terms of the modern ideologies of liberalism, conservatism, and radicalism. Since these

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[10] Rawls calls his work "Kantian constructivism in political philosophy" in "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical", p. 224n. See also Gewirth, *Reason and Morality*; O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*; Vattimo, *La societá trasparente*; Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*; Deleuze, *La philosophie critique de Kant*.

are terms of much later coinage, they are assessed in terms of
Montaigne's times and the options available to him then. In each
case, it is concluded that if Montaigne merits any of these labels,
they must be understood with "skeptical" as a qualifier, as in
"skeptical conservatism", "skeptical liberalism", and "skeptical
radicalism". And this modifier makes no small difference in the
politics that is implied under each rubric.

Chapter six turns to Hume. Unlike Montaigne, Hume's early work
was philosophical in the narrower sense, exploring epistemology
and philosopical psychology from a skeptical point of view. This
chapter explains that philosophy, and situates it in the skeptical
traditions. Hume embraces skepticism, and uses it to show that we
have no access to truths and knowledge. He concludes that in their
absence we live by custom and habit.

The next chapter explores the politics of custom and habit. In
Hume's analysis, we live by the lower epistemological categories of
belief and opinion. Hume shows that these categories explain a
great deal of politics, and urges us to live by the better forms of
belief and opinion. Personally, Hume values the life of letters, and
shows that the kind of civilization that supports it depends on the
habits of behavior known as manners. Hume's politics, accordingly,
is characterized in this chapter as a politics of opinion and manners.

Chapter eight describes Kant's efforts to answer Hume and the
skeptical traditions. It emerges that Kant's philosophy represents an
acceptance of skepticism in large part. For the noumenal, Kant de-
nies knowledge in order to make room for faith. Most of the impor-
tant questions in politics turn on the noumenal, and thus cannot be
answered with scientific knowledge. In ethics, Kant retains an ele-
ment of dogmatism, but this is always subordinated to the consider-
ation that such practical knowledge, although apodictic in its own
way, is never the same as the scientific knowledge of phenomena.
Thus, Kant's philosophy can be seen as a development within the
traditions of skepticism, even as it limits its scope.

As we shall see, one of the fundamental political values that
Kant's philosophy leads to is intellectual freedom, or, as he put it,
the courage and ability for all to use their own understanding.
Chapter nine traces the political implications of Kant's philosophy
in his politics of publicity. "Publicity" here does not mean com-
mercial advertising, but rather free public debate, especially in
print. Here we discover that Kant often appealed to a vocabulary

that had been pioneered by contemporary journalists and writers in their efforts to throw off the chains of censorship and set free the world of letters. His contribution was to give that vocabulary, and the politics that came with it, a foundation in his philosophy.

As we shall see below, the ties between the three thinkers are substantial. Paul Stapfer described Montaigne as a precursor of Kant's criticism.[11] Lewis White Beck wrote an insightful article on the commonalities between Hume and Kant entitled "A Prussian Hume and a Scottish Kant".[12] In the final analysis, however, it is probably better to appreciate how each of these thinkers took the heritage of skepticism down a different path. Montaigne eschewed philosophy, and developed a political attitude that was skeptical of any ideology, present or future. Hume and Kant each accommodated skepticism in their philosophy, but focused on different political implications. The juxtaposition of their different paths in this book points to the multiplicity and richness of the heritage of skepticism for politics.

Montaigne, Hume, and Kant were by no means the only later thinkers to be profoundly influenced by the traditions of skepticism. Much could be learned by exploring the relations between skepticism and political thought in numerous other figures such as Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein. Each of them took the heritage down different paths that ultimately have had much to do with creating our modern and post-modern ways of thinking about politics. It is hoped that this book will provoke political theorists, philosophers, intellectual historians, historians of ideas, historians of political thought, and general readers to explore more of these paths.

[11] *Montaigne*, pp. 102-110.
[12] In *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. Norton, Capaldi, and Robison, pp. 63-78.

CHAPTER ONE

# ANCIENT SKEPTICISM AND POLITICS

The best case that can be made in modern terms for the political meaning of ancient skepticism is that it provided a useful, reasonable, and consistent perspective for political thought and action in its historical context, and that it could still provide one today. Each of these terms requires explanation, which will appear below, but the general point is that ancient skepticism can be interpreted as the foundation of a political stance in a very robust sense, if not in a fully philosophical sense.

The foregoing case will be made here, despite the fact that ancient skepticism produced no major treatise on government, no elaborate political utopia, no sustained study of political life; or, at least, none of the foregoing have come down to us. But this does not mean that ancient skepticism had no engagement with politics, nor that political theories and programs cannot be drawn out of the materials that we have. Rather, the ancient skeptical materials, too often neglected in the study of ancient political thought, offer a rich field for political analysis.

In true skeptical spirit, however, the best case must be contrasted with the worst case, which holds that ancient skepticism was inconsistent, unreasonable, and politically dangerous. This latter interpretation argues that no one could really live according to skepticism, let alone that it could underwrite any worthwhile political thought or action.

Which of the foregoing cases is right? This question is wide open to interpretation because it turns out that the very identity of ancient skepticism as a unitary tradition is doubtful, the evidence we have about it is sparse, the philosophical questions it raises are numerous, and opinions of scholars have differed on almost every point under review. On the one hand, this makes any interpretation offered here no more than argumentative, often only opening up areas for discussion without providing a definitive treatment of them, and always subject to criticism from a variety of perspectives. On the other, it provides nearly inexhaustible material for reflection and debate.

This chapter introduces the reader to the tradition(s) of ancient skepticism as a whole, and offers a synthetic reconstruction of the possible political meanings. It surveys the available sources and some of the methodological questions that they raise, as well as contemporary scholarly interpretation of the politics of ancient skepticism. Two related traditions are identified, Pyrrhonian skepticism and Academic skepticism. The next chapter explores in more detail the distinguishable political implications of these two traditions. The following one asks and answers the question, "Can skeptics live a skeptical politics?"

## 1. *Overview and synthetic reconstruction*

"Ancient skepticism" refers to a body of thinkers and intellectual movements related by family resemblances and spanning the Greek and Roman worlds. Diogenes Laertius (early third century A.D.) reported that "some call Homer the founder of the school, for to the same questions he more than anyone else is always giving different answers at different times and is never definite or dogmatic about the answer".[1] He also quoted skeptical sayings from other early figures such as Euripides, Heraclitus, Xenophanes, and Democritus.[2] But Socrates (466-399 B.C.) and Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 365-275 B.C.) are most often credited with founding the main traditions of skepticism.

The genealogical scheme used here places Pyrrho at the beginning of the Pyrrhonian branch of ancient skepticism and Socrates at the beginning of the Academic branch, named after Plato's Academy and its successors. The best justification for this scheme is simply that it reflects the historiographical tradition. The differences between the two branches have often been exaggerated, and even the earliest commentators sometimes remarked that there was in fact very little difference between them. Nevertheless, this scheme has the merit of establishing order, albeit somewhat artificial, in the materials. Documentation of the following overview will be reserved for later discussion in this and the following chapters.

Pyrrho never wrote down his teachings, which were recorded by

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[1] DL IX 71 (Hicks, 2:482-5). (See bibliography for an explanation of abbreviations used in citations to ancient sources.)

[2] DL IX 71-3 (Hicks, 2:485-487).

his pupil, Timon (ca. 325-235 B.C.). Pyrrhonism did not emerge as a recognized school under Timon; and Cicero, writing in 45 B.C., rarely mentioned Pyrrho and did not treat him as a founder of Greek skepticism. Nevertheless, long after Timon one Aenesidemus (ca. 80 B.C.-120 A.D.?) wrote books entitled *Pyrrhonic Arguments* and *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and another figure, Agrippa (end of lst century B.C.?), provided materials used by later Pyrrhonists. The last major figure in this line was Sextus Empiricus (ca. 100-210 A.D.).

Placing Socrates at the foundation of skepticism turns on the argument that he only asked questions and did not teach any positive doctrines. Plato and Aristotle either misunderstood Socrates or strayed from his path when they claimed to know the truth about anything. The purportedly genuinely Socratic skeptical line took on new life in the Middle or New Academy under Arcesilaus (315-240 B.C.), evidently an acquaintance and rival of Timon, and Carneades (214-129 B.C.). Cicero (106-43 B.C.) wrote in several of his books that this was the school to which he gave his allegiance.

Skepticism was characterized by its opposition to dogmatism, which meant the holding of firm beliefs (in Greek, *dogmata*) about reality or the making of firm judgments about truth. It can only be appreciated in comparison and contrast to the rival dogmatic philosophical schools of the Hellenistic and Roman eras, the Stoics and the Epicureans, and to the surviving dogmas of Platonism and Aristotelianism.

In their own terms, the Pyrrhonists adopted an attitude of suspension of belief or judgment (in Greek, *epochē*). This, in turn, led to freedom from disturbance or tranquillity (*ataraxia*). Rather than seek the reality that was somehow behind or beneath the surface of things according to competing philosophies, they were content to live with appearances (*phainomena*).

The Pyrrhonists developed specific tools to aid in the suspension of belief, known as the "modes" or "tropes" (*tropos*). These were patterns of argument designed to answer the claims of dogmatic philosophers with opposite claims creating a balance of equal strength (*isostheneia*), which would lead one to suspend judgment. In addition, they rejected the Stoic and Epicurean doctrines of the "sign" (*sēmeion*) that could point to the reality behind the appearance.

The word "skeptic" meant "inquirer", and the skeptics spent a lot

of effort probing the claims of their opponents. The Pyrrhonists were also known as zetetics, or investigators, and by other terms of similar intent. This made for an active intellectual life, but always with the purpose of undermining dogma, and never with an intent to achieve a firm belief.

The Pyrrhonists were not saying that they knew that *isostheneia* would lead to *epochē* and then to *ataraxia*, or that it was good to set this process in motion. Their activities may have had the effect of spreading their ideas, but they did not claim to proselytize for a truth. Rather, what they did was simply what they did, with no further foundation. Their only answer to those who said that they positively wanted to hold firm beliefs was to continue to undermine such beliefs. They presumably had no answer for those who said that *epochē* did not create *ataraxia* in them, or that they did not want to attain it.

The Pyrrhonists characterized their philosophy as a "way of life", a "bent of mind", a "disposition", rather than with the more pretentious label of philosophy. They even claimed to live by certain "rules", which included following nature and adopting the local laws and customs wherever they were. But they were quick to add that these "rules" were not followed dogmatically and because they were true, but only that in fact they followed them. Their rhetoric emphasized noncommittal language such as "perhaps", "maybe", "possibly", and so forth.

Politics and political theory in this tradition could never be a matter of established truths, beliefs, or firmly held judgments. Political argument might well amount to constant debate, setting up dogmatic claims in *isostheneia*, encouraging political *epochē*. Political rhetoric would have to be noncommittal; no claims to truth would be accepted. A politics of living with appearances would rule out attempts to live by deeper truths. Skeptical politics would have to be simply a way of life, with no transcendent justification.

The Academic skeptics added their own flavor to the skeptical pot, largely by examining the question of the criterion. If one was to live by the appearances in the absence of truths, what criterion was one to use in making decisions? Here, the Academics explored the standards of the *eulogon*, or "the reasonable", and of the *pithanon*, which Cicero translated as "the probable" (in Latin, *probabile*). These standards could have served as tests of political matters as much as of other matters.

In addition to discussing these criteria, the Academics differed from the Pyrrhonists in never claiming that they were seeking *ataraxia*. Rather, at least some of them maintained that the purpose of their inquiries was the eventual attainment of truth.

The legacy of Socrates as gadfly reminds us that skeptics were in a sense parasitic on the claims of others to really know what they were doing. If all political actors were skeptics, uncommitted to beliefs, much of the usual activity of the skeptics would be pointless.

The foregoing has been presented as a synoptic overview of skepticism and an opening probe of what it could mean for politics. An attempt to see it whole is justified by the myth of "the tradition", which has been widely accepted throughout history, and by the undeniable family resemblances among the different components. Upon closer analysis, of course, it turns out that each thinker put a different twist on each factor, so that the preceding synthesis does some violence to the sources. In addition, as already mentioned, scholars disagree about the proper interpretation of each of these factors. In the following chapter, the details are teased out for each thinker. Ancient skepticism emerges as less of a unitary tradition, but perhaps more philosophically interesting.

## 2. *The available evidence*

A basic problem with the study of ancient skepticism is that most of our sources are fragmentary and second-hand. Our chief sources come from only three writers: Cicero's *Academica* (45 B.C.) and other works, Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, *Against the Professors*, and *Against the Dogmatists* (2nd century A.D.), and Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (early 3rd century A.D.). Each of these sources may have added his own coloring to materials they quoted from other figures. Beyond this, we have only fragmentary passages quoted in hostile philosophers such as Plutarch and Galen and churchmen such as Augustine, Lactantius, and Eusebius, each with their own agenda as well.[3]

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[3] For Pyrrho, the best collection of evidence is Decleva Caizzi, *Pirrone Testimonianze*. In English, there are wide and useful, although incomplete, selections from many sources in Long and Sedley, eds., *Hellenistic Philosophers*, and in Inwood and Gerson, eds., *Hellenistic Philosophy*. There are Loeb editions

This means that we have nothing directly from Pyrrho, and in fact
we have a claim that he left no writings.[4] We have only a handful
of statements from Timon, as quoted by much later writers, and
recent commentators have pointed out that Timon may not be a
reliable source for Pyrrho.[5] Much of what we have from Timon is
poetry, adding another level of interpretive difficulty.

We know about Aenesidemus largely from Sextus and Diogenes
Laertius. It has been suggested that he may have used Pyrrho's
name mainly to give himself a legitimating genealogy.[6] As for
Sextus, very little is known about his life, and even about his dates.
He was a physician but wrote, surprisingly, that it would not be
appropriate for a skeptic to belong to the Empirical school of
medicine, and that the Methodic school was closer to skepticism
than any other.[7]

The skeptical Socrates must be distinguished from the rest of our
evidence about him, which may strike some readers as illegitimate.
The most common way in which this has been done has been to
stress the differences between the early and the later dialogues of
Plato.[8] The theory here is that at first Plato represented faithfully
the real, skeptical, Socrates, and that as he grew more confident he
began to put his own dogmatic beliefs in Socrates's mouth. This
reading has the support of later skeptics, but it means that evidence
about Socrates must be used with a preconceived and self-fulfilling

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of Diogenes Laertius, Sextus Empiricus, and Cicero with the Greek or Latin facing
the English translation. There is a translation of selections from Sextus's major
writings in *Scepticism, Man, & God*, ed. Hallie and tr. Etheridge, and a paperback
German translation of Sextus's *Outlines* in *Grundriß der pyrrhonischen Skepsis*, ed.
and tr. Hossenfelder. See the bibliography for an explanation of citations used
below.

[4] DL IX 102.

[5] Frede, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, pp. 182-3. But see Stopper, "Schizzi
pirroniani", p. 270: "if we cannot discover Pyrrho in Timon we cannot discover
him at all". Ausland, "On the Moral Origin of the Pyrrhonian Philosophy", pp.
363ff., relies on Timon to show that Eusebius and other later writers distorted
Pyrrho's real meaning.

[6] Sedley, "The Protagonists", p. 16; Long, "Timon of Phlius: Pyrrhonist and
Satirist", p. 70.

[7] See House, "The Life of Sextus Empiricus", pp. 227-38; esp. pp. 236-8.

[8] For a recent discussion, see Vlastos, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge",
pp. 1-31, especially note 1.

interpretive grid.

We know about Arcesilaus and Carneades mostly from Cicero, Diogenes, Sextus, and a few later fragments. They were said to have written no books.[9]

On one important figure, rather than too little evidence we have too much. Cicero produced an immense amount of material that has survived. But this writer presents a problem of multiple identities. As mentioned above, in several of his works, both early and late, he claimed to belong to the Academic school of skepticism.[10] But some of his philosophical and especially his political writings sound quite dogmatic, leaving little room for suspension of judgment. And Cicero wrote most of the works in which he admits to skepticism in a relatively short period after his forced retirement from politics. Before that, as an active lawyer and statesman, he had argued many a case and taken many a stand with no suspicion of suspension of judgment. The relationship between his political activities and his philosophical stance is thus very complex, and must be understood if Cicero's skepticism is to be evaluated. We shall return to this matter briefly in the following chapter.

We know a substantial amount about the political contexts of men like Arcesilaus, Carneades, and Cicero. Since we have some dates and/or places for Pyrrho, Timon, and Aenesidemus, something can be said about their contexts. Almost nothing of the kind can be said about Agrippa and Sextus, since we do not know with any reliability when or where they lived.

In addition to the point that our evidence about ancient skepticism is sparse and problematic, very little of what we have is overtly political. This means that much of a reconstruction of the political meaning of ancient skepticism must be developed by analogy, implication, or extrapolation from materials that are not obviously political. Whether or not the ancient skeptics drew such implications, or would have countenanced such a use of their ideas, must remain an open question. We shall now turn to a survey of the overtly political materials.

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[9] DL IV 32-3, DL IV 65.

[10] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, I.5; *De Divinatione*, II.1, 3, 72; and elsewhere. For a recent attempt to survey all of the evidence and characterize Cicero's evolving position, see Glucker, "Cicero's Philosophical Affiliations".

3. *The overtly political evidence*

In one sense, the overtly political evidence is the easiest to identify, because by definition it refers to political categories such as tyranny, justice and injustice, law, and so forth. But there is a danger of nominalism here, of overlooking matters which have significant political implications simply because they are not couched in customary political vocabulary. This is especially the case for the indirect political implications of skeptical epistemology and practices. We shall review the overtly political evidence here, but much of the discussion in the following chapters will place this evidence in the larger context of such indirect implications.

Concerning Pyrrho and Timon we have very little evidence that directly implicates politics. Pyrrho was said to have traveled to India with Anaxarchus in Alexander's suite and Sextus reports that he accepted a thousand gold pieces from Alexander as a reward for a poem, indicating familiarity with political elites.[11] He may well have been influenced by conversations with Indian philosophers, and Diogenes Laertius reported that he lived as a recluse "because he had heard an Indian reproach Anaxarchus, telling him that he would never be able to teach others what is good while he himself danced attendance on kings in their courts".[12] In what sounds like an apocryphal story, Diogenes also reported that Pyrrho was "so respected by his native city that they made him high priest, and on his account they voted that all philosophers should be exempt from taxation".[13]

At a more theoretical level, Diogenes reported that Pyrrho "denied that anything was honourable or dishonourable, just or unjust" and held that "custom and convention govern human action" and Sextus reported that "...nothing exists which is good or bad by nature, 'but these things are decided on the part of men by convention', as Timon says".[14] All of this requires a great deal of explication, but the point here is that this is all we have overtly on politics that has been attributed directly to Pyrrho and Timon.

From Aenesidemus only the last two tropes have clear political

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[11] DL IX 61, M I 282.
[12] DL IX 63 (Hicks, 2:477).
[13] DL IX 64 (Hicks, 2:477).
[14] DL IX 61 (Hicks, 2:475); M XI 140 (Long and Sedley, 1:15).

implications. Only the tenth specifically mentions political factors: it brings out the influence of law, habit, and tradition on value judgments. Since social and political values, institutions, and practices differ among the different nations, they cannot represent some universal true nature of things. The ninth trope stresses the effects of frequency or rarity on value judgments, with obvious bearing on political life although conventional political examples are not used. If something is extremely rare, we call it a divine portent or value it highly, like gold. The dogmatists' assumption is that such value judgments make claims about the real nature of things, says Aenesidemus, and thus those judgments are subject to subversion if we cannot show how they get value independently of something as arbitrary as frequency.[15]

Sextus himself expands on Aenesidemus's tenth mode at great length. After surveying the customs of the Amazons, the Gaetulians, the Cilicians, and a host of others, he observes that "in regard to justice and injustice and the excellence of manliness, there is a great variety of opinion".[16]

In one famous passage, Sextus reported that critics often raise the issue of what a skeptic would do "should he ever be subject to a tyrant and compelled to do something unspeakable". His answer was that "he will perchance choose the one course and not the other [obey or disobey] owing to the preconception due to his ancestral laws and customs". The difference between the skeptic and the dogmatist would be that "he will certainly endure hardship more easily because he has not, like the other, any additional beliefs beyond the actual suffering".[17] Again, all of this is susceptible to multiple interpretations, and we will return to some of them below.

Sextus often thematizes the role of law in the lives of skeptics. One of the skeptical rules of life, as we have already seen, was to follow the established customs and laws.[18] Sextus's example of man's use of his own artifices in organizing ordinary life is the lawgiver.[19]

Diogenes Laertius reported of Arcesilaus that "whereas many

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[15] PH I 141-63 (Long and Sedley, 1:481-3).
[16] PH III 218 (Bury, 1:471).
[17] M XI 162-66 (Bury, 3:463-5).
[18] PH I 17, 23-4 (Bury, 1:13, 17).
[19] M VIII 200 (Bury, 2:343).

persons courted Antigonus and went to meet him whenever he came to Athens, Arcesilaus remained at home, not wishing to thrust himself upon his acquaintance. He was on the best terms with Hierocles, the commandant in Munichia and Piraeus...". Diogenes went on to report that on behalf of his city Arcesilaus "did go to Demetrias as envoy to Antigonus, but failed in his mission".[20] Two of his students were later involved in republican revolutions against tyrants in Greek cities in Asia Minor.[21] In spite of the foregoing, which establishes at least that Arcesilaus was familiar with political circles, Diogenes concludes that "he spent his time wholly in the Academy, shunning politics".[22]

Carneades's fame survived largely because Cicero incorporated a report on his mission to Rome in 156-5 B.C. in *De Re Publica*.[23] Lactantius put it more succinctly: "When he [Carneades] was sent by Athens as an ambassador to Rome, he discoursed at length on justice in the hearing of Galba and Cato the Censor, the foremost orators of the time. On the next day he overturned his own discourse with a discourse on the opposite side, and subverted justice, which he had praised on the previous day...".[24] A few other fragments from Carneades also implicate politics.

Two of the Academics must be treated somewhat differently. Socrates, of course, had a lot to say about politics, but we have no need to review it all here because according to the skeptics only part of that was said by the "real", skeptical, Socrates. This is somewhat of a circular argument, because practically by definition the skeptical Socrates held no dogmatic political beliefs, and if he discussed any such beliefs, it was only to hold them up against their opposites and thus undermine them.

Cicero as well had a lot to say about politics. But while the later Platonic dialogues are discounted in search of the skeptical Socrates, in the case of Cicero it is the earlier political writings of the engaged statesman that must be discounted to find the skeptical Cicero.

In any case, there is of course a great deal of scholarship on the

[20] DL IV 39 (Hicks, 1:417).
[21] Tarn, *Antigonos Gonatas*, pp. 334-5.
[22] DL IV 39 (Hicks, 1:417).
[23] Cicero, *De Re Publica*, III.5-18.
[24] Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* 5.14 (Long and Sedley, 1:442).

political thought of Socrates and Cicero, and thus there is less need for us to explore it here. We shall accordingly deal with these thinkers in less thorough a fashion than some of the foregoing figures, bringing them up only when relevant to the larger story about ancient skepticism and politics.

All we have done here is to adumbrate the obvious political references of the chief skeptics. It should be clear from the foregoing review that, with the exceptions of Socrates and Cicero, the material we have with overt and clear reference to politics is not extensive. If this was all that could be done to analyze the politics of the ancient skeptics, our study would be rather limited. But a much wider context for the political meaning of ancient skepticism can be created by analogy with or implication from other aspects of skep-ticism. We shall explore the meaning of the foregoing overt ref-erences in the latter context in the following chapters.

### 4. *Scholarship on the politics*

Most scholars who have commented on the political implications of ancient skepticism have done little more than assert, almost in passing, that ancient skepticism led to quietism, or conservative acquiescence in prevailing laws and customs. Some add that this is somehow a failing of the movement. G.J.D. Aalders, for example, writes that skepticism "implies political and social indifference", and asserts that the "Sceptic philosophers of Hellenistic times did not contribute to the development of political philosophy", although he does not explain whether or how the latter follows from the former[25]. Whether or not skepticism must lead to quietism or

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[25] Aalders, *Political Thought in Hellenistic Times*, pp. 50-1. Most studies of Greek political thought skip over the skeptics entirely. No mention of them is made in von Arnim, *Die politischen Theorien des Altertums*; Pohlenz, *Staatsgedanke und Staatslehre der Griechen*; Kagan, *The Great Dialogue*. Others mention individual figures only in passing, without any appreciation of skepticism as a tradition: Pyrrho is mentioned in one footnote (p. 257n.), the revolutionary students of Arcesilaus are touched on (p. 247), and Carneades's mission to Rome is discussed (pp. 277-79) in Sinclair, *A History of Greek Political Thought*. Vatai, *Intellectuals in Politics in the Greek World*, reports only that Pyrrho traveled in Alexander's suite (p. 112) and mentions Arcesilaus's friendship with the Macedonian commander and his students' revolutionary activities (pp. 121-2). See Cary's dismissive remarks in *A History of the Greek World From 323 to 146 B.C.*, pp. 355-7.

indifference will be a continuing theme throughout these chapters.

A.A. Long has asserted that ancient skepticism provided "an alternative answer for men dissatisfied with the traditional values and beliefs of a society in a state of transition"[26]. One trouble with this kind of statement is that it is too general. When, in Western history, has society *not* been in a state of transition? Why did this particular set of thinkers accept this particular alternative, when others were also available?

Other writers have done much more in attempting to relate the ideas of the skeptics to their political problem situation. W. W. Tarn, for example, asserts that the "Academy had always been the home of a quiet but well-understood patriotism", and concludes from the example of Ekdemos and Demophanes that in "the darkest hours of Macedonian rule, Arkesilaus' class-room was one of the places in which still glowed the spark of liberty, waiting to burst into flame".[27] The problem with this dramatic vision is that it is based on so little evidence. Surely the mere fact that these men who later engaged in revolutionary politics had once studied with Arcesilaus can hardly establish that his classes were the springboard of all of their activities.

As David Sedley remarks, "it has always been tempting to see [Hellenistic philosophy] as a deliberate response to a cry for help - an attempt to restore moral purpose to life in an age when dynastic rule had stifled the old type of participatory city-state and was depriving the Greek citizen of a role in the politics of his own city". But, he asserts, this "claim has not yet been substantiated. Any defense of it would probably require fuller knowledge than we possess of the social and political backgrounds from which the various adherents of the Hellenistic schools emerged"[28].

On the one hand, we do know that Pyrrho was said to have traveled in Alexander's suite, Carneades went to Rome on a famous embassy, Arcesilaus was a friend of Hierocles, and his students were involved in several revolutions, as mentioned above, so there is no reason to think that the end of republics meant the end of

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[26] Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, p. 87.

[27] Tarn, *Antigonos Gonatas*, pp. 334-5. Tarn relies on brief reports in Plutarch, Polybius, and Pausanias.

[28] Sedley, "The Protagonists", pp. 3-4.

political activity. On the other, with the exception of the special cases of Socrates and Cicero, this is practically all that we know about the political activities of the skeptics. Accordingly, the next two chapters cannot rely heavily on focusing on the political context. Rather, they will reconstruct the kinds of politics that can be drawn out of the available materials, even when they are not obviously political. Since the materials available to us are substantially the materials that were available to the early modern thinkers discussed later in this book, this will provide us with an idea of how the tradition of the ancient skeptics could be read in a political vein by these later thinkers.

## 5. *A political chronology: the Hellenistic era and Rome*

In its broadest sweep, the period we are studying begins with the era of the Greek city states, Pelopponesian War (431 B.C. - 405 B.C.) and all. Socrates (466-399 B.C.) lived in Athens during this era.

The Hellenistic era, a term of scholarly art, begins with the reign of Alexander the Great of Macedon, who dominated Greece politically and exported Greek culture to much of the East. Alexander came to the throne in 336 B.C. Pyrrho (ca. 365-275 B.C.) and his follower Timon (325-235 B.C.), and Arcesilaus (315-240 B.C.) lived in this era.

Polybius described the rise of Roman domination of the known world as occupying the years from 220 B.C. to the defeat of Perseus at Pydna in 168 B.C. and the dismantling of the Macedonian empire. Carneades (214-129 B.C.) lived in this era, visiting Rome on his famous embassy in 155 B.C.

The next watershed of importance in political history was the conversion of republican Rome into a principate, with a key date being Julius Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon in 49 B.C. This change in regime eventually cost Cicero his life in 43 B.C. Sextus Empiricus (ca. 100-210 A.D.) lived under Roman Emperors, and unless he flourished earlier than most scholars believe, so did Aenesidemus (ca. 80 B.C.-120 A.D.).

Important dates for later sources include the Emperor Constantine's edict of toleration of Christianity in 313 A.D. and the official Christianization of the Empire in 379-395 A.D. by Theodosius. Eusebius (ca. 260-340 A.D.), Lactantius (ca. 240-320

A.D.), and Augustine (354-430 A.D.) were churchmen.

This brief overview cannot do justice to the complexity and detail of politics in this long period. For example, there were many changes in the government of Athens in just the third century B.C. alone. But we have very few details about the timing of the development and recording of skeptical ideas to match up with the political history, so a long review of that history is not justified here. A few specific political events will be mentioned when relevant in the following chapter.

### 6. *The ideological context: the skeptics* contra omnes

The skeptical tradition grew up in opposition to contemporary schools of dogmatic philosophy. On one interpretation most of the skeptics were parasitic on those schools, and would have nothing to do if there were no dogmatic philosophers. A careful study of Sextus Empiricus has shown that the purpose of *zetesis*, or skeptical investigation of both sides of every point, is almost exclusively refutatory.[29] It is more likely that the Academy conducted its investigations with the intention of approaching truth, but even the Academics relied on the opposing opinions of the schools as points of departure for their work.

Platonic and Aristotelian dogmas and the minor schools of Cynics, Cyrenaics, Dialecticians, and Megarians provided targets, and should be understood as part of the context of discussion below. But throughout much of the history of the ancient skeptical movement the most prominent interlocutors of the skeptics were the Epicureans and Stoics. In most of our sources, the Stoics and Epicureans are attacked for their epistemology, physics, logic, geometry, and broad theories of ethics, and little mention is made of their specifically political positions. These dogmatic positions, however, surely would have provided targets for skeptical practices as well. A very brief review follows.

The main characters among the Epicureans are Epicurus (341-271 B.C.), and the Roman Lucretius (1st century B.C.), author of one of our chief sources, *De rerum natura*. Epicurean doctrine evolved over the years, and thus of course different skeptics would have

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[29] Olaso, "Zetesis", pp. 7-32.

been responding to different strains of that doctrine. The following sketch, however, will only touch on some of the key points.

Epicurus held that "justice was never anything *per se*, but a contract, regularly arising at some place or other in people's dealings with one another, over not harming one another and not being harmed".[30] Epicurus's successor as head of the school, Hermarchus, said that the laws represent "a rational calculation of utility" and that the "threat of punishment is addressed to those who fail to take note of utility".[31] There is evidence that some Epicureans held proto-cosmopolitan views: Diogenes of Oenoanda (2nd century A.D.) wrote that "the whole earth is a single native land".[32]

The Epicureans also sought the *ataraxia* that the skeptics found themselves in after reaching *epochē*. As a means, Epicurus recommended liberation from "the prison of routine business and politics".[33] Diogenes Laertius reported that the Epicurean wise man will not "make fine public speeches", nor "engage in politics", nor "rule as a tyrant". Nevertheless, he will "bring lawsuits" and "be concerned about his property and the future" and about "his reputation, up to the point of ensuring that he will not be disparaged". In addition, "he will on occasion pay court to a king" and "on occasion die for a friend". It was understood that "he will hold firm doctrines and not be aporetic".[34]

Zeno of Citium (334-262 B.C.) was the founder of Stoicism, and his period and the next century are called the Early Stoa. The Middle Stoa dates from Panaetius (ca. 185-110 B.C.), who wrote at length on political philosophy. The Later Stoa includes the Greek Epictetus (1st century A.D.) and Roman figures such as Seneca (1st century A.D.) and Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.).

Zeno is famous for saying that "our household arrangements should not be based on cities or parishes... but we should regard all men as our fellow-citizens... and there should be one way of life and order".[35] Diogenes Laertius reported that "some people, in-

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[30] Epicurus, *Key Doctrines*, section 33 (Long and Sedley, 1:125).

[31] Porphyry, *On Abstinence*, 1.7.1-9.4 (Long and Sedley, 1:129).

[32] Diogenes of Oenoanda, *Fragments*, 25.2.3-11 (Long and Sedley, 1:133).

[33] Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings*, 58; cf. 79 (Long and Sedley, 1:126).

[34] DL X 118-120 (Long and Sedley, 1:133).

[35] Plutarch, *On the Fortune of Alexander*, 329A-B (Long and Sedley, 1:429).

cluding the circle of Cassius the Sceptic, criticize Zeno extensively"
for, among other things, calling for community of wives and unisex
clothing; the prohibition of temples, law courts, gymnasia, and the
use of currency; and declaring that "all who are not virtuous are
foes, enemies, slaves, and estranged from one another".[36] This last
reflects Zeno's position that a good state would contain only the
wise and virtuous; in Stoic doctrine, only the wise man possessed
*epistêmê* (knowledge) and fools had only *doxa* (opinion).

Contradicting the Epicureans, the Stoic Chrysippus reportedly
wrote that "the wise man will make public speeches and engage in
politics as if he regarded wealth and reputation and health as
good".[37] Some Stoics also sought to retain moral responsibility
despite their doctrine of fate; Chrysippus did this by distinguishing
between "complete and primary causes" and "auxiliary and prox-
imate causes", holding us responsible for the latter. In a famous
colloquy, "the story goes that Zeno was flogging a slave for steal-
ing. 'I was fated to steal', said the slave. 'And to be flogged', was
Zeno's reply".[38]

The Stoics relied heavily on doctrines of nature and natural law.
The natural love of parents for their children was the "starting point
of the universal community of the human race which we seek", said
Cicero's Cato.[39] "True law is right reason, in agreement with
nature, diffused over everyone", says Laelius. "There will not be
a different law at Rome and at Athens... but one law, everlasting
and immutable, will hold good for all peoples and at all times".[40]

This natural law reasoning drove some Stoics to dogmatic com-
munitarianism: "we prefer the common advantage to our own", said
Cato, and "our country should be dearer to us than ourselves".[41]
It drove others to cosmopolitanism: Hierocles described the series
of concentric circles that radiates out from each of us, taking in
first close family, then distant family, then neighbors, then fellow-
tribesmen, then fellow citizens, and eventually working up to the
whole human race. "It is the task of a well tempered man... to draw

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[36] DL VII 32-3 (Long and Sedley, 1:430).
[37] Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-contradictions* 1034B (Long and Sedley, 1:423).
[38] DL VII 23 (Long and Sedley, 1:389).
[39] Cicero, *De Finibus* III.62-8 (Long and Sedley, 1:348).
[40] Cicero, *De Re Publica* III.33 (Long and Sedley, 1:432).
[41] Cicero, *De Finibus* III.62-8 (Long and Sedley, 1:348).

the circles together somehow toward the centre, and to keep zeal-
ously transferring those from the enclosing circles into the enclosed
ones".[42] Hume (and later Adam Smith) did not think that this was
possible.

The Early Stoa tended to the view that there should be no political
system at all. The Middle Stoa would "say that the best constitution
is a combination of democracy, kingship, and aristocracy".[43] The
Later Stoa preferred monarchy.[44] Plato and Aristotle had accepted
slavery in the good city. The Early Stoa opposed slavery, and the
Later Stoa accepted it. The Early Stoa was against the Macedonian
and Roman empires, and the Later Stoa justified Rome.[45]

The foregoing review of some of the political ideas of the
Epicureans and the Stoics has been designed to give the reader just
a taste of the dogmatic positions with which the skeptics were
confronted. Naturally, readers will have to turn elsewhere for a
more thorough review of Epicurean and Stoic political thought.[46]

## 7. Politics in the alternative

Much of the meaning of the writings of the skeptics is notoriously
debatable. It is easy to carry out the skeptical strategy of setting up
the opposing interpretations of different scholars in equal weight to
each other. But instead of simply suspending judgment as to which
is right, our purpose here is to explore the political implications of
the alternative views.

One major division of opinions in the study of skepticism began
in ancient times and is still hotly debated today. It turns on the
question whether any given figure was a "dogmatic" skeptic, who
claimed, for example, that he knew that nothing could be known, or
a thorough-going, self-referential skeptic, who said that he was not
even sure that nothing can be known. The first were called "dog-
matic skeptics" by their opponents, because they were said to

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[42] Stobaeus, 4.671,7-673,11 (Long and Sedley, 1:349).

[43] DL VII 131 (Long and Sedley, 1:433).

[44] See Devine, "Stoicism on the best regime", pp. 323-336.

[45] Erskine, *The Hellenistic Stoa*, chs. 2, 8, and Conclusion.

[46] E.g. Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*; Erskine, *The Hellenistic Stoa*;
Griffin, *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics*; Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in
Early Stoicism*.

defend a dogma, or positive claim of truth. The latter were--and still are--criticized for inconsistency and for not being able to live by their skepticism.

The significant thing about this division of opinions for our purposes is that there are both "dogmatic" and thoroughly skeptical readings of all of the ancient skeptics. That means that there are at least two possible sets of political implications for each figure, depending on the interpretation that is selected. It is reasonable to assume that the politics of a dogmatic skeptic will be more dogmatic than the politics of a thorough-going skeptic, and we will explore what the differences may be. However, it is probably fair to say that there will be substantial family resemblances among the political implications of all interpretations of the skeptics. That is because their writings, by any reasonable interpretation, have family resemblances which explain why they have been grouped together under the label of "skepticism" by philosophical historiography since ancient times.

One interpretation of the skeptics will not receive much attention here, although it is not wholly implausible. That is that the ancient skeptics were insincere, writing in bad faith. On this interpretation, the skeptics never meant what they said, but were always playing with their interlocutors.[47] This is a global interpretation, and the only way to answer such an accusation must be with another global interpretation of all of the evidence. I cannot make the case for it here, but I see seriousness of purpose, sincerity, and even moral uprightness in the evidence as a whole. The skeptics were under no obligation to believe every argument that they made in hopes of creating *epochē*, and using an argument that they did not believe in does not mean that their intentions were insincere.

The rest of the discussion of the ancient skeptics in this book takes place in two complementary stages. Chapter two works out from the ancient sources. It breaks down the elements of ancient skepticism by thinker, concept, and method, and draws out the initial political implications. Chapter three works back from recent English-language scholarly debate. It explores some answers to the question, "Can the skeptic live his skepticism?", and applies them to the question, "Can skeptics live a skeptical politics?" Naturally, the

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[47] See Glidden, "Skeptic Semiotics", *passim.*

latter question can be found implicitly in chapter two, and a reading
of the earlier chapter will help the reader understand the later one;
but each chapter is written to stand on its own.

CHAPTER TWO

# PYRRHONIAN AND ACADEMIC POLITICS

Why did Pyrrho live as a recluse? Why did Sextus think that skeptics would suffer less at the hands of tyrants? Why did Carneades argue pro and contra on the question of justice? An answer to these and similar questions about ancient skepticism and politics requires an inventory of the alternative readings of the work of each of the major figures in the tradition. This chapter provides such an inventory.

Concepts and methods do not exist without the thinkers who use them. There was no agreement among the ancient thinkers concerning how to use the concepts and methods of skepticism, and each one used them in different (albeit often overlapping) ways. Therefore, this chapter works out from each of the main thinkers involved, examining their different approaches and the implications for political thought and action.

The political issues that are discussed are the issues that come up in the ancient sources: discrete issues such as slavery; matters of authority and obligation such as paying court to kings and obedience to tyrants; general theories such as the source and status of justice; and the parameters of political argumentation. We shall be concerned throughout with the common charge that skepticism must lead to political quietism, where quietism means withdrawal from or indifference to politics.

PART ONE: PYRRHONIAN POLITICS

1. *Pyrrho and Timon:* epochē, ataraxia, *eschewing philosophy, and living with appearances*

Diogenes Laertius reported that Pyrrho set an example of suspension of judgment, maintaining that "each thing is no more this than this"; and that he was credited with living by his philosophy.[1]

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[1] DL IX 61-2 (Long and Sedley, 1:13).

The first element of Pyrrho's way, also described as suspension of belief, was called *epochē* by the later Greeks.[2] As Eusebius reports, "the outcome for those who adopt this attitude, says Timon, will be first speechlessness, and then freedom from disturbance".[3]

"Freedom from disturbance" is a translation of the Greek *ataraxia*, also translated as "tranquillity". It is a negative concept: *tarachē* meant nuisance, trouble, disturbance, or anxiety, and the prefix "a-" meant freedom from those states. As we have seen in the previous chapter, other schools such as the Epicureans claimed to seek *ataraxia* as a goal. Pyrrho was much admired for his tranquillity and equanimity in the face of pain, and of difficult questions.

Even in ancient times there was disagreement about the meaning of the claim that Pyrrho lived by his skepticism. According to Diogenes Laertius, it was reported that "when Anaxarchus fell into a slough, he passed by without giving him any help",[4] presumably because he could not be sure that Anaxarchus had really fallen into the slough, or that he could really help him, or because it did not disturb his tranquility. Living by his principles reportedly meant "avoiding nothing and taking no precautions, facing everything as it came, wagons, precipices, dogs, and entrusting nothing whatever to his sensations. But he was looked after... by his disciples".[5] Diogenes also reported that Aenesidemus defended Pyrrho against this charge, asserting that "although he practiced philosophy on the principles of suspension of judgment, he did not act carelessly in the details of daily life".[6] Diogenes's source for the first stories may have been hostile, and Aenesidemus may be polishing Pyrrho's image for his own purposes, but in any case the two versions have

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[2] Hallie, *Scepticism, Man, & God*, observes that the fragments we have from Pyrrho do not use the word *epochē*, but asserts that Pyrrho clearly uses the concept (p. 14). See Couissin, "L'origine et l'evolution de l'*epochē*", pp. 373-397. Diogenes Laertius read the word back into the earliest Pyrrhonists: the skeptics strive for *epochē*, "so Timon and Aenesidemus declare" (DL IX 107; see also DL IX 61).

[3] Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 14.18 (Long and Sedley, 1:15).

[4] DL IX 63 (Bury, 2:477).

[5] DL IX 62 (Long and Sedley, 1:13).

[6] *Ibid.*

survived in various guises down to the present.[7]

It is hard to see how the first version of Pyrrhonism described in the previous paragraph could underwrite any politics at all. Such an extreme skepticism may not be irrationalism, since it may have been derived from a logical thought sequence, but for practical and political purposes it amounts to a form of anti-rationalism: at least it does not employ reason in the pursuit of any practical goals. If the skeptic requires disciples who are acting on different principles in order to remain alive, skepticism certainly cannot be a universal way of life. Pyrrho's alleged behavior may be a form of protest against prevailing political systems, but it is parasitic on whatever political system keeps the skeptic alive. Its effect must be that of an "unpolitics" or an anti-politics, rather than of any identifiable political stance.

The alternative reading of Pyrrho opens the way to more practical political implications. Whatever Pyrrho's approach may have been, Timon was concerned with theoretical questions in the context of practice. In Eusebius, he is quoted as giving advice on how men can be "happy". In order to be happy, they "must consider these three questions: first, how are things by nature? Secondly, what attitude should we adopt towards them? Thirdly, what will be the outcome for those who have this attitude?"[8]

One might expect that these questions would lead to answers with political implications. "Attitudes" toward political matters might entail some sort of action as an "outcome". But it turns out that before any possible issues of political substance are raised, most attitudes are foreclosed. Timon is quoted as saying that Pyrrho declared that "things are equally indifferent, unmeasurable and in-arbitrable. For this reason neither our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods. Therefore for this reason we should not put our trust in them one bit, but we should be unopinionated, un-committed and unwavering, saying concerning each individual thing that it is no more than it is not".[9] The only attitude that is justified

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[7] Almost all commentators conclude that Aenesidemus was right (e.g. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, p. 86), but Frede, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, pp. 182-3, leaves open the possibility that Pyrrho really was anti-social or irrational.

[8] Eusebius, *Praeparatio*, 14.18 (Long and Sedley, 1:14).

[9] Eusebius, *Praeparatio*, 14.18 (Long and Sedley, 1:15).

is that which is associated with not taking a stand.

Not taking a stand, of course, has political implications. And in case they are not clear enough, Diogenes cites Pyrrho's specifically political theory: Pyrrho "would maintain that nothing is honorable or base, or just or unjust".[10] Not taking a stand, and not believing in any standard of justice, must rule out many political activities and positions. It is certainly in open opposition to political stances that are based on concepts of justice.

Pyrrho was credited with saying that "convention and habit are the basis of everything that men do".[11] Sextus Empiricus drew a connection between the theory of justice and this theory of custom and habit: it may be the case that "nothing exists which is good or bad by nature, 'but these things are decided on the part of men by convention', as Timon says".[12] Taken at face value, neither of these statements entails that Pyrrho or Timon thought that this was good; that one positively should live by convention. Rather, all we have is descriptions. As we shall see below, there are dogmatic and thoroughly skeptical readings of these descriptions.

If Pyrrho and Timon were indeed claiming that it is good to live by convention and habit, certain political implications would be entailed. But there is no reason to accept the common assumption that a positive evaluation of custom implies quietism. If justice and politics depend on convention, everything will depend on what kind of conventions we have. They may require withdrawal from politics, but they may just as well require active participation in politics, where that is the convention.

Other fragments from Timon confirm a potentially activist stance. "That honey is sweet I do not affirm, but I agree that it appears so".[13] This is a form of the famous distinction between phenomena, or appearances, and the real nature of things, which was

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[10] DL IX 61 (Long and Sedley, 1:13). Flintoff, "Pyrrho and India", observes that "there is not a single word of either approval or disapproval of the political or social and economic arrangements of either Elis or any other part of the Greek speaking world" in our fragments (p. 108, n. 28). But surely this is going too far: the claim in the text that nothing is just or unjust must mean disapproval of any political arrangements that are justified by claims of justice.

[11] DL IX 61 (Long and Sedley, 1:13).

[12] M XI 140 (Long and Sedley, 1:15).

[13] DL IX 105 (Long and Sedley, 1:15).

already a commonplace in Greek philosophy by Pyrrho's time.[14]
Applied by analogy to politics, we might say that we do not know
if such and such a decision would be right, or such and such per-
sons should be trusted, but that it appears to us that it would be
right or they should be trusted. By removing the political from the
realm of reality to the realm of appearances, some kinds of political
action based on those appearances might be justified.[15]

One of Timon's typically cryptic phrases was this: "the appear-
ance [phenomenon] prevails everywhere, wherever one goes".[16]
Sextus's interpretation of this was that the skeptic, "if he was not
to be entirely inert and without a share in the activities of daily life,
was necessarily obliged to possess some Criterion both of choice
and aversion--that is to say, the Appearance".[17] Diogenes reported
that Timon claimed that "he has not departed from normal practice"
and concluded that "the apparent is the Skeptic's criterion".[18]
Thus, the skeptic does not need to know that what he is doing is
really right; it is enough if it appears to be right. This can be
reconciled with the claim that the skeptic does not take a stand by
recalling that what Pyrrho said is indeterminable is what things are
"by nature" and the "nonevident accompaniments of appear-
ances".[19] Taking a stand for the phenomena as they appear to us
is not taking a stand on what things really are.

Thus, the answer to Timon's first question was that we cannot
know anything about the real nature of things, thus refuting the
pretensions of the other Greek philosophers. The answer to the
second one was that the attitude we should adopt toward things is
to live according to how they appear to us. The answer to the third
is that men will be happy once they are emancipated from the futile
search for hidden realities, living in *ataraxia* and in accordance
with the phenomena. One of the implications of this analysis is that
where philosophy, politics, and human happiness cannot be mixed,
it is philosophy that is dispensable.

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[14] See Stough, *Greek Skepticism*, p. 31.
[15] Compare De Lacy, "*Ou mallon* and the Antecedents of Ancient Scepticism":
"The problem of action thus finds its solution on the phenomenal level" (p. 603).
[16] DL IX 105 (Long and Sedley, 1:15).
[17] M VII 30 (Bury, 2:17).
[18] DL IX 105-6 (Long and Sedley, 1:15).
[19] DL IX 105 (Long and Sedley, 1:15).

There are at least two readings of Pyrrho that conclude that he was, finally, a dogmatist. One departs from the proposition that Pyrrho was understood to be a severe moralist, and that his morals were held as dogma.[20] The other takes his statement that "things *are* equally indifferent, unmeasurable and inarbitrable" (emphasis supplied) as a metaphysical thesis about the way things really are.[21] There is something to be said for both of these readings. Cicero discussed Pyrrho as a moralist,[22] and those morals must be founded somewhere. And Pyrrho was evidently an anti-intellectual or irrationalist in the sense that he was reportedly assured enough about his claim that all is indeterminable that he did not bother to "investigate what winds prevail over Greece, [nor] from whence all things arise and into what they pass", but rather maintained tranquillity even about such matters.[23] Supporting the general proposition that the earliest skeptics could be dogmatic, Timon is quoted as saying, "I will speak a word of truth,... [I] who have a correct yardstick".[24]

A third reading of Pyrrho and Timon makes them thorough-going skeptics about reality who live by appearances. On this reading, they never say anything about reality, but simply live in accordance with the way things appear to them. In the last-cited quote from Timon, the ellipsis is for the phrase "as it appears to me to be".[25] His "truth", on this reading, is about nothing more than an appearance.

On the first dogmatic reading, Pyrrho's dogmatic morals would surely have implications for politics. Unfortunately, however, we do not have much information about those morals. We have the

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[20] See, e.g., Long, "Timon of Phlius: Pyrrhonist and Satirist", p. 84, n. 16; Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 76-8; Ausland, "On the Moral Origin of the Pyrrhonian Philosophy", *passim*.

[21] Eusebius, *Praeparatio*, 14.18 (Long and Sedley, 1:15). Scholars who defend the position that Pyrrho was a dogmatist include Decleva Caizzi, *Pirrone testimonianze*, pp. 225ff., Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1:17, 446; 2:6; Striker, review of Giannantoni, pp. 148-49. *Contra*, see Stopper, "Schizzi Pirroniani", pp. 268-75.

[22] Cicero, *De finibus*, III.11-12, IV.43, 49, 61; *De officiis*, I.6.

[23] DL IX 64 (Long and Sedley, 1:19).

[24] M XI 20 (Long and Sedley, 1:19).

[25] M XI 20 (Long and Sedley, 1:19). See the discussion of this point in Decleva Caizzi, *Pirrone*, pp. 255ff.

report that he lived as a recluse "because he had heard an Indian reproach Anaxarchus with the remark that he would not be able to teach anyone else to be good while he paid court to kings", but we do not have any evidence as to what "good" means here.[26] Nevertheless, it clearly rules out some kinds of political behavior: courtiership and its analogues.

Pyrrho or Timon may have held dogmatic moral positions concerning *epochē* and *ataraxia*. Perhaps they believed or knew that these states had moral value.[27] Then, commitments to other beliefs and anything disturbing or upsetting in politics could be ruled out on such dogmatic moral grounds. The problem with this interpret-ation is that although they may have taken it for granted, we do not have any clear evidence that they claimed that *epochē* and *ataraxia* were morally good.

On the second dogmatic reading mentioned above, an additional requirement of a skeptical politics would be that one positively should not try to investigate further the nature of the world, because it really is unmeasurable. Not only political science, but any form of political inquiry aimed at reality, would evidently be ruled out. Together with the foregoing dogmatic reading, this would confirm that Pyrrho's politics was an anti-politics, a politics of withdrawal. We will see below that some of the later skeptics departed significantly from this position, and stressed the importance of further inquiry.

On the third reading, it only appears that things are inarbitrable, and skeptic morals are followed only because they appear to be the right ones. On this reading, no one has privileged access to the truth about reality, and claims to such truths will not be admitted in a Pyrrhonian politics. Everything will turn on the peculiar nature of appearances, but unfortunately we do not have much evidence

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[26] DL IX 63 (Long and Sedley, 1:13).

[27] See Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*: "Pyrrho could consistently claim to be a sceptic concerning knowledge of the external world or objective moral standards, and at the same time maintain that 'indifference' does not extend to tranquillity and mental disturbance. About the respective goodness and badness of these states of mind he could claim to be subjectively certain" (p. 78). But Long admits that this is no more than speculation. Striker, in "Ataraxia: Happiness as Tranquillity", comments that the skeptic "had better not believe that tranquillity itself is a good, lest he begin to worry about that" (p. 106).

from Pyrrho or Timon about how they work. As we shall shortly
see, at times Aenesidemus wrote that phenomena appear virtually
alike to all those in a similar situation, which gives him an inter-
personal standard for action and belief. In the cases of Pyrrho and
Timon, however, we do not yet have such a standard. So, the indiv-
idual skeptic will do what appears right to him or her, and will not
admit the claims of others to knowledge about reality. On the other
hand, the skeptic will not be able to assert that he or she knows that
any others are wrong in their interpretations of appearances.

We can test the foregoing readings by reference to a political
institution like slavery. Did Pyrrho have a dogmatic moral stance
concerning slavery? Unfortunately, we have absolutely no evidence
on this, or on any other practical moral issue except paying court
to kings. What, then, are the implications of the inarbitrability of
things for slavery? If things really are unmeasurable, then not only
can no stand be taken on the moral issue of slavery, but it is not
even worth investigating the issue. On the thoroughly skeptical
reading, some people might say that slavery appeared wrong to
them, but others might say that it appeared right to them. There
would be no appeal to the reality behind the appearances.

Awareness of the artificiality of conventions might incline those
who support slavery to support it all the more because of its
fragility, and encourage their opponents because they will not have
to worry that the institution is backed up by some kind of natural
law or universal justice. This does not mean that no action is
justified, but that no action is justified because of its relation to
reality. The best available justification is only in appearances, and
thus no action can avoid challenge on the basis of other appear-
ances.

One commentator has suggested that Pyrrhonism would have little
relevance to ordinary life, on the ground that it is largely phil-
osophers who make assertions about truths behind phenomena.[28]
But anyone familiar with the claims of a wide range of political
actors throughout history to privileged access to Allah's or God's
or the Founding Fathers' truths will recognize that such assertions
are in fact widely used in ordinary political life. Pyrrhonian restric-
tions on such claims might indeed rule out a large part of political

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[28] Stough, *Greek Skepticism*, pp. 153f.

discourse.

## 2. *Aenesidemus: the tropes, signs, and common appearances*

Aenesidemus represents the next stage in the development of Pyrrhonian skepticism. He is credited with the use of eighteen "tropes" or "modes" (*tropos*), patterns of argument that provided systematic materials for answering the claims of dogmatic philosophers with equally strong (isosthenic) claims, which lead one to suspend judgment. Ten of these were designed to undermine beliefs concerning 'the real nature of things', which formed the basis for Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, and Epicurean theory, including political ideas. Eight of them were attacks on the possibility of causal explanation.[29]

We have already mentioned the tropes with the most obvious implications for politics.[30] The ninth of the first ten tropes stressed the effects of frequency or rarity on our value judgments. The point here is to undermine claims about the reality of values by stressing its contingency on frequency or rarity. In politics, the analogy might be to political actors or ideas valued for their frequency (e.g., democracy's valuation of majority opinion) or rarity (e.g., various elitisms). Aenesidemus's ninth trope would undermine any suggestion that such value attributions reflect reality rather than sheer contingency.

The last of the first ten tropes has been the most influential in the history of skeptical thought. As we shall see in following chapters, it played an important role in Montaigne's and Hume's work. As Sextus describes it, this mode is the one "which especially bears on ethics", which in the ancient classification included politics.[31] It ransacks world history to find opposing lifestyles, laws, customs, myths, and dogmatic suppositions. It operates by opposing "each of

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[29] They are found at PH I 40-163, 180-185 (Long and Sedley, 1:474ff and Bury, 1:26-93, 102-107). There is a translation and extensive philosophical commentary in Annas and Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism*. Sextus describes seven more modes, five of them attributed to Agrippa, at PH I 164-9, 178-9. For philosophical discussion, some of which is relevant to foundationalist and coherentist theories of political epistemology, see Barnes, *The Toils of Scepticism*.

[30] See chapter 1, section 3.

[31] PH I 145 (Annas and Barnes, p. 151).

these sometimes to itself [i.e. one custom to another custom], sometimes to one of the others [i.e. a custom to a law]".[32] The anomalies which are produced leave us unable "to say what each existing object is like in its nature" and thus make it "necessary for us to suspend judgment on the nature of external existing objects".[33]

A couple of examples give a taste of this tenth trope: "We oppose law to law like this: in Rome anyone who renounces his father's property does not repay his father's debts, but in Rhodes he does repay them in every case. Among the Tauri in Scythia there was a law that strangers were sacrificed to Artemis, while among us killing a human at a religious rite is prohibited".[34] Aenesidemus expects that such a report will lead us to suspend judgment as to which of these laws actually captures nature, and thus tells us which things really ought to be prohibited and which required.

Annas and Barnes observe that the "Pyrrhonist who suspends judgement is, in his inner indifference to any reality behind the appearances of value, a very different kind of person from the rest of us... He accepts things as good or bad in an entirely passive way... So, even if his behaviour is externally indistinguishable from the dogmatist's, his inner state is totally different".[35] Wittgenstein would have doubts about this distinction between inner and outer states, and it is hard to believe that the only differences between skeptics and dogmatists would be "internal". But it is easy to believe that recognition of the variety of customs, laws, and so forth, in conjunction with skeptical doubts about criteria for choosing among them, could lead to a change in commitment to any particular set of customs, laws, and practices. At one extreme, it might lead to an irrational, unjustified flinging of oneself into commitment to them, and at another it might lead to abandonment of them.

Annas and Barnes also think that the upshot of Aenesidemus's modes is that the skeptic "does not question, or regard as suitable objects of deliberation or concern, his own ethical beliefs and

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[32] PH I 148 (Annas and Barnes, p. 151).
[33] PH I 163 (Annas and Barnes, p. 153).
[34] PH I 149 (Annas and Barnes, pp. 151-2).
[35] Annas and Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism*, p. 169.

dispositions. He reacts to [e.g.] incest with horror because he is a Greek. But... his upbringing and dispositions are simply part of appearances; just as he suspends judgment as to whether incest is really good or bad, so he is bound to suspend judgment as to whether his own responses to it are well founded or not".[36] On the one hand, this may mean quietism and uncritical behavior. On the other hand, it means that the skeptic cannot assert that his or her own values are in some way privileged.

The second set of eight tropes provide a different approach, amounting to a methodology for the study of causation. This is particularly significant for politics, since it is hard to imagine an important political issue that does not turn on questions of causality. Thus, these tropes can be read as a methodology for political analysis. The first one anticipates Hume with the observation that causal explanations "are all concerned with what is unclear".[37] In a political context, this could refer to explanations of political behavior as inspired by, e.g., some nonevident deity. Aenesidemus regrets that such explanations "have no agreed confirmation from what is apparent".[38]

The second and third tropes on causation criticize philosophers for accepting one causal explanation over equally valid competing explanations and generally assigning causes without any obvious justification. The fifth rebukes them for not arriving at "common and agreed approaches" for determining causation.[39] Together with the first one, this trope taxes philosophers with their own inability to agree.

The sixth trope censures philosophers for accepting facts that support their claims while rejecting data that conflict with their viewpoints, and the seventh points out that they often allow themselves the luxury of inconsistency when it serves their purposes. The parallel with political argumentation and rhetoric is obvious. The eighth trope criticizes philosophers for refusing to accept that some matters are simply doubtful, and for going on to "rest their teaching about what is puzzling upon what is just as puzzling".[40]

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[36] *Ibid*.

[37] PH I 180 (Annas and Barnes, p. 181).

[38] PH I 181 (Annas and Barnes, p. 181).

[39] PH I 183 (Annas and Barnes, p. 181).

[40] PH I 184 (Annas and Barnes, p. 181).

The implication here may be that the skeptical politician will simply leave many things in doubt.

Some of the language in the foregoing discussion of Aenesidemus's tropes suggests dogmatism. How can he be sure that using them will make it "necessary" for us to suspend judgment? How does he know that we will always find *isostheneia*? A dogmatic reading is, of course, possible; but it is easy to discount this dogmatic language by recalling the status of the skeptical enterprise as a whole, which is that it is nothing more than a practice. The tropes are nothing more than *ad hominem* therapeutic tools designed to create *epochē*.[41] Aenesidemus does not need a theory to the effect that they always will; he merely reports that using the tropes is one of the things that a skeptic does.

Aenesidemus also rejects the Stoic and Epicurean doctrines of "signs" as a basis for inferences about nonevident real objects, on the ground that they violate the standard of commonality. "Signs" are not phenomena because phenomena "appear in like manner to all those in a similar condition" and signs do not.[42] The standard for judging phenomena is that in principle everyone can agree, and not everyone agrees which phenomena are signs for which real objects. For example, not everyone agrees on what a given act of a politician means about his or her soul.[43]

According to Sextus, Aenesidemus says "there is a difference in things apparent, and asserts that some of them appear to all men in common, others to one person separately, and of these such as appear to all in common are true, and the other sort are false".[44] Aenesidemus's appeal to the standard of commonality here, in reference to signs, and in tropes one and five on causality, has suggested to some commentators that this was his own dogmatic doctrine.[45] Others credit him with a thoroughly skeptical approach, and assume that he was only using it for the skeptical purposes of bringing about suspension of judgment among those who might feel

[41] See Annas and Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism*, e.g., p. 45.

[42] M VIII 234 (Bury, 2:361).

[43] See Sextus's example of multiple interpretations of a man's fall from wealth into poverty at M VIII 201 (Bury, 2:343).

[44] M VIII 8 (Bury, 2:243).

[45] E.g. Stough, *Greek Skepticism*, pp. 96-7.

it cancels their claims.[46] In either case, it may have political implications.

If some kind of commonality is required by the dogmatic skeptic with respect to phenomena, then commonality will serve as a standard in politics as much as in any other field. Presumably, agreement on the means and ends would be a condition of a just politics. On the other hand, even if the thorough-going skeptic suspends judgment about commonality, if this commonality is something that is recognized as a value by dogmatists, it must carry legitimacy for them, even if not for the skeptic. As long as there are dogmatists, then, the skeptics could continue to badger them with their failure to produce the common standards for the judging of political matters required by the dogmatists' own terms.

If the skeptical position is taken as wholly negative, nothing but a suspension of judgment, what kind of politics is implied? Apparently following Pyrrho and Timon on this, Aenesidemus is quoted as saying that "what appears" serves as the criterion.[47] In the absence of a standard of common appearances reviewed above, this may mean a politics of individual appearances. People would act on what appears to each of them as the right thing. This may mean anarchy, or, if appearances are coordinated by custom, law, nature, or chance, it may mean community. At the very least, this creates a space for individualism by emphasizing the source in each individual of the criterion for political and other kinds of action.

### 3. Sextus Empiricus: associative signs, rules for living, and rhetoric

The major source for our knowledge of ancient skepticism is Sextus Empiricus, a historian and polemicist but also apparently an original thinker in his own right. He claimed to follow Pyrrho, and in large part he does. But he adds his own critical developments to the Pyrrhonian battery of arguments, disagreeing in certain respects with Aenesidemus.

Sextus often follows Aenesidemus in raising the question of verifiability in claims of sensation and perception. "What is pre-evident and manifest is in all ways pre-evident and manifest and is agreed

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[46] Rist, "The Heracliteanism of Aenesidemus", pp. 316ff., writes that the standard of commonality belongs to Aenesidemus's pre-skeptical period.

[47] DL IX 106 (Long and Sedley, 1:468).

to by all", he writes. If we can refer "a statement to the fact", or test it, we can "say that the statement is true", or false. But if the statement is about "things non-evident", it is like "shooting at a mark in the dark; for just as it is probable that one of these hits the mark and another misses,... it is impossible to learn which of them is in accord with it and which at variance".[48]

Sextus appeals to what looks like empiricism at other points, as well. In addition to the standard of agreement of all, he writes of following "rules" that issue out of repeated observations of phenomena.[49] In medicine and astrology, he writes that if we are justified in drawing conclusions about something, "by no means has it been observed only once in a single case but many times in many cases".[50] This has lead some scholars to write of Sextus's philosophy as an empiricism.[51]

However, as much as induction is a guide to life, it is at best "insecure", Sextus admits;[52] by no means are its conclusions true in some larger sense. Other scholars, therefore, conclude that wherever Sextus makes claims that rely on empiricism, he is doing so only for the sake of argument, and in fact holds no philosophical dogma at all.[53] This view interprets Sextus consistently with the thoroughly skeptical view of Aenesidemus sketched above. And Sextus clearly undermines the commonality standard used by Aenesidemus: as far as truth is concerned, the numbers of those who agree are unimportant; we could all be wrong.[54] Sextus reminds us of the self-referentiality of the skeptical saying that "nothing is true".[55] This formula reserves the concept of truth for the strong sense of certainty about reality that the other schools held to, and then denies its application to anything, including itself.

The empiricist interpretation of Sextus would presumably imply attention in political action and justification to obtaining evidence

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[48] M VIII 322-5 (Bury, 2:407-9).

[49] M VIII 291 (Bury, 2:393).

[50] M V 104 (Bury, 4:369).

[51] E.g. Brochard, *Les Sceptiques Grecs*, book 4; Chisholm, "Sextus Empiricus and Modern Empiricism", pp. 371-384; Stough, *Greek Skepticism*, pp. 107-112.

[52] PH II 204 (Bury, 1:283).

[53] E.g., Long, "Sextus Empiricus on the Criterion of Truth", pp. 36-7.

[54] M VII 53-5, 329.

[55] PH I 14 (Bury, 1:11).

and generally meeting the standards of an empirical political 'science'. The more consistently skeptical interpretation has different implications. If truth only applies to reality and not to ordinary life, then practical politics is never a question of truth or falsity. Claims to truth in politics are ruled out on the epistemological level. One political effect of this could be that we should always leave room for flexibility, and for change. That something has never been done before or has never worked in the past does not mean that it could not be done in the future.

Sextus's refutation of Stoic and Epicurean theories of signs is more technical than Aenesidemus's, and provides further clues to a skeptical politics. He completely rejects 'indicative' signs, which are supposed to point to 'naturally' non-evident realities. But disagreements over such non-evident realities cannot be settled by evidence, and thus cannot be confirmed or falsified. Such claims, it can be inferred, do not belong in politics.

But Sextus accepts the use of 'associative' or 'commemorative' signs. These are signs, such as a torch or the sound of a bell, with conventional significance. We associate these things with temporarily non-evident objects, such as the enemy or friend that the torch announces, or the selling of meat or the need to water the roads that the bell indicates.[56] These are in principle verifiable. Sextus brings out their characteristics by pointing out that they are part of "ordinary life" and "generally believed by all ordinary folk to be useful", suggesting that they are part of the "living by phenomena" that Pyrrho and he call for.[57] Close to Aenesidemus on "commonality", he calls them "common preconceptions".[58] He also indicates that they are part of the political world: their meaning is determined by the lawgiver.[59]

Like Pyrrho, Sextus also subverts philosophy. If nothing at all is true, then his own philosophy cannot be true. Sextus admits that he has to kick away his ladder. "After he has arrived at his thesis by means of the argument proving the non-existence of proof... [the skeptic] should then abolish this very argument".[60] This does not

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[56] M VIII 193, 200 (Bury, 2:339, 341-3).

[57] M VIII 156-8 (Bury, 2:319).

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] M VIII 200 (Bury, 2:343).

[60] M VIII 481 (Bury, 2:489).

mean that his own argument is wholly invalid. Rather, it serves as
a purgative, clearing away other arguments, and then can be in-
cluded among the arguments about which the skeptic can be prop-
erly skeptical.[61] This is a philosophy to end all philosophy. As
Pyrrho had done, we will all now go about our business of living
with phenomena.

And Sextus is much more thorough in his descriptions of how to
live with phenomena than any of the previous thinkers. He wrote
that skeptics live "a life conformable to the customs of our country
and its laws and institutions, and to our own instinctive feel-
ings".[62] This was expanded into four "rules for life" which con-
sisted of 1) following the "guidance of nature", 2) "constraint of the
passions", 3) living in accordance with "the tradition of laws and
customs", and 4) "instruction in the arts". This was because we
"cannot remain wholly inactive".[63]

Following the laws, customs, and institutions of a country prob-
ably rules out revolutionary activity in many cases. But, as we have
seen above, it does not necessarily close out all political activity,
and may specifically require what we call constitutional political
activity. As we have seen, Sextus recognizes a role for the artificial
development of conventions by the lawgiver. In order for a life con-
formable to customs and laws to be wholly quietist and necessarily
unchanging, one would have to assume that the traditions were and
always had been fixed and unchanging. For such a life to entail
political inactivity, one would have to assume that there were no
laws or customs permitting or requiring political activity. This is
possible, of course, and an example that springs to mind is Marx's
caricature of oriental despotism.

But if the customs, laws, and institutions of a nation have a
history, there will have been change at some point, justifying
further change. Not only will constitutional political activity be
justified, but revolutionary activity may sometimes be condoned.
For a time in Mao's China, revolution was underwritten by the
customs, laws, and institutions. Thomas Jefferson recommended a

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[61] PH I 206, II 188; cf. PH I, 14-15 (Bury, 1:123, 271, 11).

[62] PH I 17 (Bury, 1:13).

[63] PH I 23 (Bury, 1:17). See Barnes, "The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist", pp. 13-15
and McPherran, "Ataraxia and Eudaimonia in Ancient Pyrrhonism: Is the Skeptic
Really Happy?", pp. 160ff., for a discussion of these rules.

watering of the tree of liberty with the blood of patriots on a regular basis.[64] Less dramatically, Michael Oakeshott has insisted on the dynamic, "pre-eminently fluid" nature of custom and tradition, even among the most "conservative" of nations.[65]

It is at least plausible that any conceivable polity founded on skeptical principles would necessarily include constitutional political activity. Defenders of laws established only by convention would have no claim that those laws represent a larger truth. Nothing about the efficiency of old law or untried novelty of proposed laws could establish that the old laws were necessarily the best. Changing established laws can be an established custom.

What would politics be like simply in accordance with customs and laws, and without deeper philosophical commitments? Sextus gives us an example: there are "those who fancy that [the skeptic] is confined to a state of inactivity or of inconsistency". These people say that if a skeptic should "ever be subject to a tyrant and compelled by him to do something unspeakable, either he will not submit to the order given him but will choose a voluntary death, or else to avoid torture he will do what is commanded"; but in any case, he will have chosen a course of action according to some theory. But, Sextus says, "the Sceptic does not conduct his life according to philosophical theory". Rather, "when compelled by a tyrant to commit any forbidden act he will perchance choose one course and avoid the other owing to the preconception due to his ancestral laws and customs". He may be punished by the tyrant, but "compared with the Dogmatist he will certainly endure hardship more easily because he has not, like the other, any additional beliefs beyond the actual suffering".[66] The skeptic is spared the additional agony of indignation at injustice, of resentment of cruelty, and of similar philosophical interpretations of the event. Politics loses its philosophy, but not its activity.

Similarly, following the guidance of nature does not necessarily mean living a mindless, thoughtless life, indifferent to politics. Sextus writes that we are creatures "naturally capable of sensation

[64] Jefferson, *Writings*, p. 911 (letter to William Smith, November, 1787).
[65] E.g., Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, p. 31.
[66] M XI 162-166 (Bury, 3:463-5); cf. PH I 27-30, PH III 235ff.

*and* thought" and that "man is by nature a truth-loving animal".[67] Perhaps we are naturally prone to think up new ways to organize our politics. Moreover, the skeptics "yield to those things which move us emotionally and drive us compulsorily to assent".[68] So the skeptic would give a place to some of the emotional elements widely recognized in politics.

The last rule for living is to follow an art or profession. It is apparently no accident that many great skeptics have been profess-ionals. Sextus was a physician, and his skepticism may have been in part a reaction to dogmatic schools of medicine which purported to practice medicine on philosophical principles. It may have been the training and experience of lawyers such as Cicero and Montaigne that turned them to skepticism. As a youth, David Hume contracted "the Disease of the Learned" from lack of purpose in his studies, so he determined to try the active life of the merchant as a sort of profession.[69]

Sextus always says that the rules for living are accepted un-dogmatically and "in accordance with appearances".[70] Purporting to follow Pyrrho, he says that "it is sufficient, I think, to live by experience, and without subscribing to beliefs, according to com-mon practices and preconceptions, suspending judgment with res-pect to those statements that issue from dogmatic subtlety and are furthest removed from the usage of ordinary life".[71] One commen-tator suggests that this implies "intimate relations with a particular culture" and thus that "there will not be an international or inter-cultural brand" of skeptic.[72] This is possible, of course, but it is also possible that the "common practices" that skeptic follows would be those of the cosmopolitan community. It is worth ob-serving that the practices that we think of as "popular culture", including some elements of political culture, are becoming increasingly homogenized around the world in our day. In Hellen-istic times, the Greek world at least was cosmopolitan in some respects.

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[67] PH I 24, M VII 27 (Bury, 1:17, 2:15) (emphasis supplied).
[68] PH I 193 (Bury, 1:113); cf. DL IX 108.
[69] Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, vol. 1, pp. 14-18.
[70] PH I 16-7, 23-4; PH III 235 (Bury, 1:13, 17, 483).
[71] PH II 246 (Bury, 1:315).
[72] Naess, *Skepticism*, p. 30.

The just-mentioned commentator points to a tension between con-
formity and skepticism, and suggests that the skeptic will respond
skeptically to "requests to subscribe to the absolutes of his
community".[73] But perhaps Sextus's point is that there will be no
absolutes in a skeptical community, and even that one need not be
committed to any particular community. Sextus does not qualify his
advice about following customs by reference to the customs of any
particular neighborhood or native city. Montaigne would later make
it explicit that the skeptical way was to follow the customs wherever
one happened to be.

Sextus also gives us a great deal more material about skeptical
rhetoric. He catalogs the meaning of a large number of standard
skeptical expressions such as "not more", "nothing must be
determined", "perhaps", "maybe", "possibly", "I suspend judg-
ment", "I determine nothing", "all things are undetermined", "all
things are non-apprehensible", "to every argument an equal argu-
ment is opposed".[74] These are all meant to drive home the skep-
tic's doubts. But they are always employed "not by way of author-
itatively explaining the things with reference to which we adopt
them, but without precision and, if you like, loosely".[75] This
suggests that they are never employed as dogma, but only as
answers to the same.

Sextus's work *Against the Rhetoricians* constitutes a polemic
against a major contemporary alternative to skeptical rhetoric,
which was the rhetoric of the law-courts. This kind of rhetoric
teaches people how to bend and break the laws, Sextus reports, and
requires one "to be a cheat and a juggler and reared up amidst the
worst kinds of conduct". It is designed to persuade people of things
that are not true. Sextus seems to prefer "common usage" and the
"common man's speech", which is in keeping with his claim that the
skeptics live like ordinary people, and suggests that he thinks the
common man is less pretentious in his claims to truth than the
lawyer.[76]

It is hard to pin down exactly what the employment of Sextus's

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[73] Naess, *Skepticism*, p. 32.
[74] PH I 187-208 (Bury, 1:107-123).
[75] PH I 207 (Bury, 1:123).
[76] M II 10-12, 28, 58-9, 65, 77 (Bury, 4:195, 203, 217-9, 221, 227).

rhetoric in politics would mean. On the one hand, taken only up to a certain point it suggests a civility and politeness in politics that might actually facilitate communication. This is supported by Sextus's praise of his own sect of Pyrrhonians for its "gentle character".[77] On the other, it could lead to an anti-intellectual irrationalism, preventing any communication. Still another effect could be the masking behind benign rhetoric of an arbitrary or cruel politics.

Sextus's overall approach is best recapitulated in terms of his descriptions of skepticism as a "way of life", a "bent of mind", a "disposition", and a "mental ability".[78] In these terms, it is emphatically not a philosophy or dogma. Pyrrho had made his most important contribution by his way of life, and rather than taking his sayings as a philosophy, they should probably be taken as a rejection of all positive philosophy. Sextus reaffirms this role for the skeptic. But as we have seen, although some interpretations of the Pyrrhonian way of life rule out certain kinds of politics, others are consistent with, and even support, some kinds of politics.

### PART TWO: ACADEMIC POLITICS

The Academic tradition of skepticism developed at roughly the same time as the Pyrrhonian, and coexisted in greater or lesser rivalry with it. It can be argued that the two movements are not any more different from each other than some of the figures or movements inside each tradition, so the principle justification for treating them as different movements is the historiographical tradition. Both Aenesidemus and Sextus distinguished the two, and later commentators maintained the distinction.

The name "Academic" derives from the first major flowering of this movement in the "Middle" (sometimes "New") Academy, which was the successor to Plato's Academy. Arcesilaus and Carneades were the heads of the Academy in the years ca. 273-242 B.C. and the mid-second century B.C., respectively, and presided over the chief Greek manifestation of Academic skepticism. Bridging the Greek and Roman worlds, one of our best sources concerning Academic skepticism is Cicero, who claimed to follow its teachings.

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[77] M I 6 (Bury, 4:5).
[78] PH I 8-9, 197-201 (Bury, 1:7, 115-19).

## 1. *Socrates: a forerunner*

Socrates was a skeptic, Cicero wrote, because he argued both sides of every issue but never came to conclusions.[79] Tradition had it that he was the wisest because he knew how little he knew. Certainly the questioning, dialogic style of Plato's early dialogues supports this skeptical interpretation. It is rarely clear that Socrates is taking a stand even as he pushes a particular line of argument. Numerous variations on this interpretation of Socrates as a skeptic are possible: a convincing recent interpretation finds him skeptical of grand theories of morals even as he holds a handful of particular moral truths.[80]

A full review of Socrates's politics cannot be attempted here, but at least a sketch of the skeptical reading of his politics is required for any survey of the politics of ancient skepticism. Socrates's most famous political act, it is probably safe to say, was his decision not to escape into exile after his trial and conviction. Since the story, as reported in Plato's *Crito, Apology*, and *Phaedo*, is well known, it will be sufficient to observe how it can and cannot be read as a skeptic's political act.

Socrates justified his acquiescence in his sentence by saying that a voice told him how to behave. If that was a claim to privileged access to truth about reality, it was not a skeptical claim, and we can see why Montaigne would later be critical of this aspect of Socrates's reasoning. But if it was only a claim about appearances (a metaphorical way of saying that that was the way things appeared to him) then it may have been skeptical.

Socrates's further reasoning has more affinities with later skeptical teachings. It was, first and foremost, to follow the laws. As we have seen, this was also a Pyrrhonist teaching. Judging from Socrates's place in prison, at first blush it seems non-revolutionary and quietist. But staying and drinking his Hemlock instead of escaping into exile may have been intended as subversive of some Athenian practices, and it probably helped guarantee immortality for

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[79] Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I.11; cf. his *Academica*, I.44-46, where Socrates is considered a dogmatist for believing the dictum that nothing can be known, and Plato is cited as a skeptic because nothing is stated positively in his books and there is much arguing both pro and contra.

[80] Lesher, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", pp. 275-88.

Socrates's teachings. Following a life of what was seen by his enemies as political subversion, Socrates's behavior can hardly be considered simple quietism.

For the purpose of the history of skepticism, Socrates's importance is at least three-fold. His dialogic method of inquiry was certainly a forerunner of the skeptical method and skeptical dialectic. His submission to the laws was probably a source for the skeptical advice of obedience to prevailing laws, customs, and institutions. And the tranquillity with which he faced his own death was an example of *ataraxia* which could inspire later skeptics.

## 2. *Arcesilaus and "the reasonable"*

We have already seen in chapter one that Arcesilaus refused to wait on the Macedonian ruler, Antigonos Gonatas, and that two of his students were later involved in revolutionary activities. Similar reports about Zeno have led one recent commentator to conclude that Zeno was a partisan of democracy and Athenian freedom against oligarchic and Macedonian hegemony. Answering scholars who believe that the relationship between Antigonos and Zeno was purely that of teacher and pupil, he asks the pertinent question, "could it really be divorced from politics, given the position of Antigonos in Athens?"[81] This was in a period when the Peripatetics were generally inclined to Macedon, and in 307 B.C. the city went so far as to ban all philosophical schools that did not have the support of the demos.[82] Thus, it is likely that Arcesilaus's behavior had political resonances that everyone would have understood, and this probably accounts for the preservation in our sources of information about it.

Unfortunately, however, the evidence is inconclusive. On the one hand is the evidence mentioned above that suggests anti-Macedonian politics. But on the other hand, we have the report that Arcesilaus was "on the best of terms" with Hierocles, the Macedonian commandant in Piraeus, who was virtually blockading Athens. On the issue of involvement in political office, we have the conflicting reports that Arcesilaus participated in an embassy, and that he spent

[81] Erskine, *The Hellenistic Stoa: Political Thought and Action*, p. 78.
[82] *Ibid.*

his time wholly in the Academy, shunning politics.[83]

Our sources for Arcesilaus's thought make no obvious connections to such political matters. They show him as a polemicist, arguing against the opinions of all men, as Cicero put it.[84]

There is some evidence that Arcesilaus, who converted the Academy to skepticism, was a dogmatist. Sextus wrote that "his Way of thought is almost identical with ours", but that "whereas we [true Pyrrhonists] make these statements [about the merits of *epochē* and *ataraxia*] not positively but in accordance with what appears to us, he makes them as statements of real facts, so that he asserts that suspension in itself really is good and assent bad", and added that he was accused of surreptitious dogmatic Platonism.[85] In addition, Cicero implies that, unlike Pyrrho, Arcesilaus gave lip service at least to the idea that the purpose of all this arguing pro and contra was to "fashion something which is either true or comes as close to truth as possible".[86]

One standard that he invoked in argument has potential political implications. That is the criterion of the *eulogon*, or "the reasonable". As Sextus reported it, "Arcesilaus says that one who suspends judgment about everything will regulate choice and avoidance and actions in general by 'the reasonable'; and that by proceeding in accordance with this criterion he will act rightly; for happiness is acquired through prudence, and prudence resides in right actions, and right action is whatever, once it has been done, has a reasonable justification".[87]

As in the previous cases, it is debatable whether or not Arcesilaus would have said this kind of thing as representing his own doctrine,[88] or simply as a debating tool consisting of turning a Stoic

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[83] See chapter 1, section 3.

[84] Cicero, *Academica*, I.45; cf. *De finibus*, V.10.

[85] PH I 232-3 (Bury, 1:143). Sextus also reported that Arcesilaus was accused of being a surreptitious dogmatic Platonist (PH I 234). But Sextus may have had some polemical purpose in setting Arcesilaus up as a dogmatist, so this evidence may be suspect. As we shall shortly see, scholars debate as to whether or not his criterion, the *eulogon*, is dogmatic.

[86] Cicero, *Academica*, II.7-8 (Long and Sedley, 1:443-4).

[87] M VII 158 (Long and Sedley, 1:451).

[88] Ioppolo, "Il concetto di 'eulogon' nella filosofia di Arcesilao", pp. 151ff.

concept against the Stoics themselves.[89] Either "the reasonable" is a dogmatic criterion for all action, including political action, or it is required in their own terms by the Stoics. If the former, Arcesilaus would require political thinkers and actors to give good reasons for what they are doing, and at least some forms of political behavior, such as irrationalist, "know-nothing" politics, would be ruled out. If the latter, Arcesilaus is saving "the connexion between happiness, prudence and right action" for the Stoics, "while denying that all three of these depend on knowledge".[90] If the latter, the skeptic will, of course, continue to suspend judgment even about "the reasonable".

## 3. *Carneades and "the credible"*

Carneades's intellectual activities were carried out in a practical context: he was seeking guides to the "conduct of life" and the "attainment of happiness".[91] Like Arcesilaus, he appealed to a criterion that can be read as a guide to choosing among social and political alternatives. This was the standard of the *pithanon*, or "credible" impression. As in the case of Arcesilaus, this can be interpreted as his own dogmatic criterion (and here at least some scholars switch sides from their positions in the debate over Arcesilaus[92]), or as a way of turning Stoic principles against the

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[89] Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p. 93; Stopper, "Schizzi Pirroniani", pp. 277-8; Striker, review of Giannantoni, pp. 150-1; Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, p. 457.

[90] Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, p. 457.

[91] PH I 231, M VII 166 (Bury, 1:143, 2:91).

[92] E.g. Ioppolo, "Il concetto di 'eulogon'", who believes that Carneades's *pithanon* was only a debating device designed to reduce the Stoics to absurdity (p. 160); Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, is unable to decide whether Arcesilaus defended the *eulogon* as his own doctrine, or used it only as a debating tool, but he thinks that "Carneades arrived at a theory of knowledge which anticipates in many respects modern types of empiricism" (p. 96); Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, "suggest that Arcesilaus disavowed all doctrines" but that the *pithanon* served Carneades as a subjective criterion (pp. 457-60). For an account of both sides in an earlier stage of this debate, see Striker, "Sceptical Strategies", pp. 55ff.

Sextus wrote that Carneades's doctrine of the *pithanon* was ultimately dogmatic (PHI 231), and that Carneades was dogmatic to "affirm that all things are non-apprehensible" whereas the true skeptic "regards it as possible that some things

Stoics.

What makes an impression credible? The general answer is: evidence. Carneades argued that the criteria of credibility are variable, depending on the situation. For ordinary, unimportant matters, the Stoics' clear and distinct impressions would be enough. If you are wrong, it will not matter too much. But in matters "pertaining to happiness", you will want to meet more criteria. It should be observed that many of the issues of politics might well fall under this category. Here, Carneades offers at least four suggestions. First, you will want to take more time to check the impression. Second, you will want to get witnesses; your own impression is not enough and you will want it confirmed by others. Third, you will want to test your impressions, perhaps by repeating them. And fourth, you will want to check the consistency of the impression in question with other impressions: i.e., if it looks like an apple, does it also feel like one and smell like one?[93] In describing Carneades's criteria, Sextus mentions a political analogy. Just as you would test potential magistrates and judges about their wisdom and knowledge of the law, you should test all of your impressions.[94]

On the one hand, if we follow those who think that these criteria were accepted by Carneades as his own dogma, we can imagine applying them to other matters in the field of politics. They may be taken to underpin the dogmatic positions in ethics and theology that Carneades is sometimes thought to have held.[95] The criteria would recommend taking time, testing plans, making sure of a consensus, and maintaining consistency in political matters of importance. According to Stough, there is no limit on the amount of testing that might be required,[96] and thus politics might be understood as a process of ongoing testing and inquiry. There is nothing fatalist or quietist about this.

On the other hand, Carneades himself may well have preferred to suspend judgment on all such matters, and only used these criteria

may be apprehended" (PHI 226 [Bury, 1:139]). Again, however, Sextus may not be wholly reliable.

[93] M VII 176-89, PH I 227-8 (Bury, 2:95-103, 1:139-141).
[94] M VII 182-3 (Bury, 2:99).
[95] Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 99ff.
[96] Stough, *Greek Skepticism*, p. 58n.

to draw attention to Stoic inconsistencies. He is said to have maintained that "nothing is absolutely a criterion of truth", and Cicero often observed that he would advance a particular view "not that he held it himself but in order to combat the Stoics with it".[97] He may have intended no political stance whatsoever,[98] but at the very least he provided a list of their own criteria that the Stoics could use as a political epistemology.

As we have seen in chapter one, Carneades is best known for his famous speeches at Rome, arguing one day in favor of the notion of natural justice and its benefits, and the next day against it, asserting that justice interferes with self-interest and that there is no natural law. The immediate response of "the cautious Cato, taking the view that speeches of this kind made it impossible to sift falsehood from truth", was to urge "the Senate to settle the matter of the Athenians' fine with all speed 'so that these men may return to their schools and lecture to the sons of Greece, while the youth of Rome give ear to their laws and their magistrates, as in the past'".[99] Did Carneades intend to provoke rapid consideration of his embassy by this method, or did he intend to subvert Roman political morality? If he had either of these motives, then we have to give him credit for considerable political sophistication.[100] Or was his behavior simply a dialectical "challenge to any moral philosopher who seeks to show that justice and self-interest can be combined in a coherent ethical system", as one recent commentator puts it?[101] This much is certainly consistent with the general program of skepticism.

Just as influential as the report on Carneades's arguments for and against justice was his discussion of the moral dilemma of ship-

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[97] PH I 226 (translation from Stough, *Greek Skepticism*, p. 58n.); Cicero, *Academica*, II.131 (Rackham, p. 639) and elsewhere.

[98] In "The Positive Beliefs of the Skeptic Carneades", Minar points out that "we know little of his attitudes on the political and social problems of his day", but nevertheless argues that "in comparison with his opponents, in some respects he achieved, through his refusal to dogmatize, what would generally be regarded as more advanced views" (p. 71).

[99] Walbank, "Political Morality and the Friends of Scipio", p. 175 (quoting Plutarch).

[100] Erskine, *Hellenistic Stoa*, p. 88, notes that "it was becoming increasingly common to use philosophers as ambassadors" in this period.

[101] Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p. 106.

wrecked sailors who have only one plank to survive on, which will
support only one person. Should the stronger one push the weaker
one off? As Lactantius put it, Carneades argued that "either there
is no justice, or if there is some, it is the highest foolishness"
because if a "just man prefers to die now rather than bring force
against another, he is a very fool".[102] Pufendorf, Grotius,
Achenwall, Barbeyrac, and Kant all responded to this problem.
Thus, Carneades's legacy to later political thought is one of the
greatest of influences of ancient skepticism in early modern Europe.
Natural law thinking was spawned by the response of men like
Grotius and Hobbes to Carneades's critique of natural justice.[103]

## 4. *Cicero and "the probable"*

Cicero appears here largely as an epigone. It would be fascinating
to piece together the many threads of his life and work, showing
when, where, and how his professed allegiance to Academic skep-
ticism[104] affected his political thought and action. I have found no
thorough study of this matter in the literature,[105] but it cannot be
attempted here because it may well require a whole volume of its
own. Cicero's importance in this field is hard to overestimate,
because he is our earliest surviving source for much of the evidence
that has been reviewed above. In addition, much of early modern
skepticism was Ciceronian, drawing explicitly on Cicero's
texts.[106] However, all that will be attempted here is a review of
some of his remarks in the *Academica*, his sustained treatment of
skepticism, with help from *De Natura Deorum*.
    Cicero's translation of Carneades's *pithanon* was the term

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[102] Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones*, 5.16 (slightly modified from translation by
McDonald in *Lactantius: The Divine Institutes*, pp. 367-8).
    [103] See Tuck, "Grotius, Carneades and Hobbes", pp. 43-62; Hruschka, "Rechts-
fertigungs- und Entschuldigungsgründe: Das Brett des Karneades bei Gentz und bei
Kant", pp. 1-10.
    [104] See chapter one, note 10.
    [105] From a reading of some of the recent literature on Cicero's political
thought, one would not even suspect that Cicero was (or ever claimed to be) a
skeptic. See, e.g., Holton, "Marcus Tullius Cicero", in Strauss and Cropsey, eds.,
*History of Political Philosophy*.
    [106] See Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus*.

*probabile* (in English, 'probable').[107] Skeptics "hold many doc-
trines as probable, which we can easily act upon but scarcely
advance as certain", he wrote. One of the effects of this reliance on
probability was emancipatory: skeptics "possess our power of judg-
ment uncurtailed, and are bound by no compulsion to support dogma
laid down for us almost as edicts by certain masters".[108]

Cicero wrote that Academic skepticism was a "purely negative
dialectic which refrains from pronouncing any positive judg-
ment",[109] but it was not obscurantist, and the withholding of
assent did not imply an end to the activity of inquiry. Unlike what
we have seen of Pyrrho, above, who did not inquire into the winds
that blew over Greece, Cicero wrote that skeptics "desire to
discover truth... [and] pursue it with the fullest diligence and
devotion". As we have seen, he reported that the "sole object of our
discussion is by arguing on both sides to draw out and give shape
to some result that may be either true or the nearest possible
approximation to the truth".[110]

The difference was that where other philosophers pursued their
research "with the intention of assenting, believing and affirming",
the skeptic deemed "that it goes well with him if... he has
discovered that which bears a likeness to truth".[111] Thus, although
the goal is truth, the skeptic virtually recognizes that it will never
be reached. And Cicero's examples make this easy to understand
and accept: no "human intellect has a sufficiently powerful sight to
be able to penetrate the heavens and get inside the earth... [nor do
we] know our own bodies... [nor] do we grasp what mind is".[112]
We can, and do, live without knowing these things.

It all really boils down to a question of usage, Cicero says:
"whereas you speak of things being 'perceived' and 'grasped', we
describe the same things (provided they are probable) as
'appearing'".[113] The skeptic keeps his or her perspective by
saying that "the sky appears to be blue" rather than swearing that

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[107] *Academica*, II.99 (Rackham, p. 593).
[108] *Academica*, II.8 (Rackham, p. 475).
[109] *De Natura Deorum*, I.11 (Rackham, p. 15).
[110] *Academica*, II.7-8 (Rackham, pp. 473-5).
[111] *Academica*, II.128 (Rackham, p. 633).
[112] *Academica*, II.122-4 (Rackham, p. 625-7).
[113] *Academica*, II.105 (Rackham, p. 601).

it really is blue.[114]

Reliance on probability is potentially in tension with the skeptics' recognition that "opinion and custom are all-prevailing".[115] Cicero tells us that he counsels upholding "the beliefs about the immortal gods which have come down to us from our ancestors, and the rights and ceremonies and duties of religion", and this may sound quietist.[116] But the doctrine of probability also gives one "the probable" as a "canon of judgment both in the conduct of life and in philosophical investigation and discussion".[117] It could be subversive if opinion and custom are tested for the probability of the claims on which they are based.

What, then, are the implications of all of this for politics? We have already mentioned that a thorough canvassing of the implications of Cicero's *Academica* and his skepticism expressed elsewhere for his politics would probably require a separate book. That book would have to explore whether or not the dogmatic assertions in his *De Legibus* and *De Re Publica* of the 50's B.C., when he even attacks the skeptics,[118] could survive the *Academica* and his later philosophical writings of the 40's B.C. Suffice it for this chapter that all of the skeptical ideas that Cicero claimed to believe in in the 40's point toward moderation, tentativeness, and distrust of human knowledge in the strong sense. But they were expressed by a well-known man of action and did not by any means exclude vigorous worldy action, as long as it was taken with trepidation and forethought. This may have been the most attractive aspect of Cicero's skepticism for later political thinkers.

## CONCLUSION

At the end of this chapter, we are faced with several questions. In the final analysis, what was the difference between the ancient Pyrrhonians and Academics? Were either or both of these schools dogmatic skeptics or thoroughly skeptical skeptics? What, finally,

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[114] Cf. *Academica*, II.105 (Rackham, p. 603).

[115] *Academica*, II.44 (Rackham, p. 453).

[116] *De Natura Deorum*, III.5-10 (Rackham, pp. 289ff.).

[117] *Academica*, II.32 (Rackham, p. 509).

[118] Cicero, *De Legibus*, I.39, and Scipio's refutation of Carneades in the *De Re Publica*.

are the possible political implications of their various stances?

The answer to the last question will depend on the answer to the first two. With respect to the first one, one recent commentator has argued that there is no great difference between the two. Both were concerned to show that the arguments of the dogmatic philosophers were groundless. On this reading, the Academic skeptics were the more radical of the two because they never argued *in propria persona*, and never even promised that their work would lead to *ataraxia*. As a purely negative dialectical strategy, Academic skepticism emerges as a source of melancholy and pessimism, while Pyrrhonism, with its promise of happiness, may still retain a certain gaiety.[119]

An alternative reading would start from the point that Arcesilaus, Carneades, and Cicero can be distinguished from the Pyrrhonians by their interest in the elements of a properly justified belief or truth. Taken as doctrine, their theories go some way toward establishing a scientific and social theory of truth or belief. For politics, the significant thing is that they provide more concrete guidelines for living with appearances than the Pyrrhonists did, and are in no danger of pure nihilistic irrationalism. Whether they actually proposed these criteria as dogma, or simply used them against dogmatic thinkers, they provided the foundations of a political science for later thinkers.[120]

With respect to the second question, we have seen that the variety of readings of each figure suggests that it is possible to interpret each one as either a dogmatic skeptic or a thoroughly skeptical skeptic. On top of other complications, a diachronic analysis might suggest that no single position remains the same over time. One writer has written of an oscillation between two contradictory poles: one of an integral nihilism and the other confined to expressing an empirical relativism.[121] However, our brief review above has suggested that with respect to political implications, the alternative interpretations do not make much of a difference except at what

[119] Striker, "Über den Unterschied zwischen den Pyrrhoneern und den Akademikern", p. 168.
[120] Another option is to characterize some Academics (e.g. Carneades) as thoroughly skeptical, and others (e.g. Cicero) as dogmatic skeptics, as Frede does in *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, esp. pp. 216-18.
[121] Dumont, *Le Scepticisme et le phénomène*, p. 16.

might be considered the extremes of full irrationalism or a dogmatism virtually indistinguishable from other dogmatisms.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to decide any of these questions definitively. It is only designed to ask what, on any of several interpretations, can we conclude that a skeptical politics would be like? It would have to contain some of the elements of the different skepticisms reported above. By definition it could not be purely dogmatic. Perhaps it would come down to interest brokering, bargaining, and so forth, among people who see justice and other erstwhile "realities" each in a different way. In modern terms, *Realpolitik* or the power politics of so-called "realism" in international relations, and the pluralism of "interests" in domestic politics, might qualify as skeptical politics. Ancient skepticism would then indeed seem to have a substantial compatibility, and perhaps complicity, in fundamental features of modern liberal politics.

CHAPTER THREE

# CAN SKEPTICS LIVE A SKEPTICAL POLITICS?

Throughout history, the skeptics have been accused of inconsistency, irrationality, absurdity, and self-refutation. Sometimes this charge has turned on the question of self-referentiality: if the skeptics suspend judgment about this or that, do they also suspend judgment about suspending judgment about it? Sometimes it has turned on the claim that the skeptics could not really live by their skepticism. There are numerous variations on the theme of these critiques. They must be answered if skepticism is to sustain any sensible politics.

By now it should be clear that almost all discussions of ancient skepticism bear in one way or another on the question, "Can the skeptic live in accordance with skepticism?" We have already reviewed Aenesidemus's rejection of the most simplistic answer, reported by Diogenes Laertius, that the skeptic will walk off of cliffs. But a particularly lively and subtle debate has focused on a more sophisticated version of this question in recent years.

There are two levels to the contemporary debate. Contributions by Jonathan Barnes, Myles Burnyeat, Michael Frede, and Charlotte Stough have provided what is virtually a set-piece of point and counterpoint on the question, with special attention to the epistemological issues. They provide the basis for Part One of this chapter, which explores their arguments and draws the political implications. Further contributions by Julia Annas, Mark McPherran, Michael Williams, and Hayden Weir Ausland have shifted the emphasis to the practical and moral level. Part Two of this chapter explores the political implications of some of the different interpretations advanced in this level of the debate.

Naturally, a focus on these authors is not intended to imply that they are the only ones who have made significant contributions to the debate. And of course only a partial commentary on these authors will be possible within the confines of this chapter. Nevertheless, that will be enough to suggest the range and variety of the possible implications of ancient skepticism for politics.

Our twist on the question in debate, of course, is to ask it as,

"Can skeptics live a skeptical politics?" As in the foregoing chapter, this question will be answered by reference to the implications of these interpretations for discrete issues such as slavery; matters of authority and obligation such as the duty to participate in politics and to obey tyrants; general theories such as the source and status of justice; and the parameters of political argumentation. We shall see that skeptics can indeed live a skeptical politics, even if that implies living with a certain incoherence.

Since the just-mentioned issues were Hellenistic issues, this much of the discussion can be carried out without fear of anachronism. But one more objective of this chapter is to explore the question of the implications of ancient skepticism for modern liberalism. Here there is some danger of anachronism, and the following discussion should be understood only as an attempt to suggest the kind of implications for modern times that can plausibly be drawn from the ancient materials. No claim is made that the implications that will be discussed are exhaustive or exclusive, or that they are entailed in any rigorous sense. No normative claim to the effect that it is a particularly good thing that ancient skepticism and modern liberalism have certain affinities is intended.

In this spirit, it will emerge that very little of the recent debate rules out a vigorous politics, consistent in some ways and inconsistent in others with modern liberalism. We shall have occasion to compare the political implications of ancient skepticism with such features of liberalism as the importance of debate; pluralism and toleration of different opinions; political participation and representative government; respect for individuals; the rule of law; and opposition to tyranny.

## PART ONE: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEBATE

### 1. *Frede and the politics of the skeptic's beliefs*

Michael Frede argued in a 1979 article that the ancient skeptics did indeed have beliefs about the way things are, but that no specific views or beliefs define Pyrrhonian skepticism as it is described by Sextus.[1] Thus, any skeptic could very well believe that the wine is

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[1] Frede, "Des Skeptikers Meinungen", cited from the English version: "The Skeptic's Beliefs" in Frede, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*. Frede casts doubt on

red, that he or she is hot, and that certain ethical and political views
are right, to take typical beliefs that Frede discusses. The difference
between the skeptic and the dogmatist is a matter of attitude toward
these beliefs. The "skeptic is acutely aware of the fact that in all
sorts of ways things might, in reality, be quite different from how
they appear to be". But, "this possibility no longer worries him";
he has no "dogmatic craving for the security of true belief".[2]

On Frede's reading, skeptics could easily participate in politics
and live their skepticism. The skeptics would simply live in accord-
ance with their political beliefs. Unlike the dogmatists, however,
"when moral or political questions are at stake" the skeptic will not
claim that he has "some deeper insight, even if his experience
seems to tell against it".[3] The skeptics' political beliefs will be
more open to revision based on experience, and as a matter of pol-
itical argumentation they will not accept other people's claims to
such deeper insights in justification of their beliefs.

Frede begins with the objection expressed over and over again in
the history of philosophy, that it is impossible to live without
beliefs, and thus that the skeptics could not live their skepticism.
His canon of interpretation is to "take the skeptics' protests -that
this objection does not really tell against their position- at least as
seriously as the fact that they were constantly confronted by it".
Taking the skeptics' protests seriously, Frede argues that the sense
of suspending judgment of the skeptics is separable from the sense
of holding beliefs, and that even where the skeptics suspend judg-
ment, they in fact hold many beliefs and "cannot avoid knowing
many things".[4] Moreover, this is not because of an inconsistency,
and it does not prove that the skeptic cannot live in accordance with
skepticism.

It is a misunderstanding, Frede writes, to think that the skeptics
were saying that they withheld judgment concerning the way things
are, but that they did have beliefs about how things appear. Thus,

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Pyrrho's credentials as a Pyrrhonist at pp. 182-3 and draws most of his account
from Sextus. Footnotes to multiple quotations from the same article in this chapter
will be reserved for the last of such quotations in each paragraph.

   [2] *Ibid.*, pp. 198, 199.
   [3] *Ibid.*, p. 198.
   [4] *Ibid.*, pp. 180, 181, 179. Note that Frede treats belief and knowledge as
interchangeable.

when the skeptic suspends judgment about whether something really is red or sweet, he or she may still believe that it is (and not just that it appears) red or sweet. There is "a perfectly good sense in which someone who suspends judgment about how things *really* are can have beliefs about how things are" (emphasis supplied). To say that the only beliefs that one should hold are beliefs about how-things-*really*-are is to accept the dogmatists' standards. If the skeptic were reduced to saying that it "only seems as if things were so and so", that thought would presuppose "that he believes what the dogmatists believe, namely, that, in reality, things are quite different from the way they seem to be".[5] But the skeptic suspends judgment on this point as well.

Thus, the appearances that the skeptics respected so much may in fact provide them with beliefs about the-way-things-are. The dogmatists may very well assume that only reason can justify a claim about the-way-things-really-are. The skeptics' experience with reason, however, is that they can find good arguments for both sides of every issue, and thus they have no reason to trust it. Therefore, they are not going to require that reason underpin their beliefs. They can believe something simply because it appears to them to be the case.

In addition, the skeptic can believe many things that he or she has not observed. Frede's example is that the skeptic might be born into a Stoic society and go on believing in the Stoic God after losing confidence in the Stoic proofs. Again, only the dogmatist would insist that there be some criterion for distinguishing between true and false beliefs about such unobserved things, where "the skeptic does not rely on any criterion for his beliefs," as Frede observes.[6] Thus, there is no particular set of beliefs that the skeptic has to hold just because he or she is a skeptic.

At this point, Frede's argument seems to have taken him to the point that in principle the skeptic can have just about any belief, and that those beliefs require no justification. Some skeptics may believe that a particular institution like slavery is acceptable, and others may think it is not. There would seem to be no skeptical way of adjudicating between them. "On the whole, though, the skeptic

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 191.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 199.

will mostly believe what experience suggests to him", Frede adds.[7] This addition, however, is not defended. If any justification of a belief is dogmatic, then it is quite arbitrary to suggest that there are any limits on the range of beliefs that a skeptic may have. It is only a contingent historical matter if in fact skeptics have generally drawn their beliefs from experience.

Frede's chief conclusion is to draw attention to the fact that what "fundamentally distinguishes the skeptic from other people are not the beliefs he has but his attitude toward them". The skeptic "takes the phenomena as they come, but he knows better than anyone else that nothing rules out the possibility that things could really be radically different"; and he finds the "dogmatic craving for the security of true belief... at best, futile, perhaps even pathological and harmful".[8] With this attitude, the skeptic cannot defend his moral and political principles on any ground but his own belief. But he can undermine the claims of dogmatists by reducing them to no more than beliefs of the same status as his own.

On this interpretation, the skeptic can believe in justice and injustice, subject to taking Sextus's qualification seriously: "nothing exists which is good or bad *by nature*".[9] The skeptic's belief is not based on any insights into "nature". Rather, he or she is perfectly satisfied to believe in justice, even though he or she knows that such a belief is merely "decided on the part of men by convention" (M XI 140). The skeptical rules for living that we have reviewed in the previous chapters may provide for at least some coordination of ideas about justice: if the skeptic generally adopts the conventions where he lives, he presumably adopts the conventions about justice as well. But, of course, if there is more than one convention about justice, any two skeptics may have different beliefs about it, and that may lead to political conflict.

How would Frede's skeptic respond to the dilemma of the tyrant? Recall that Sextus raised the issue of what the skeptic would do "should he ever be subject to a tyrant and compelled to do some-

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[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] M XI 140 (emphasis supplied) (Long and Sedley, 1:15). Further references to Sextus are in the text. The translations have been taken from Bury, Long and Sedley, or the authors under discussion.

thing unspeakable". Sextus answered that "he will perchance choose
the one course and avoid the other [obey or disobey] owing to the
preconception due to his ancestral laws and customs" (M XI 164,
166). In Frede's reading, that would be simply because those laws
and customs have given him the belief that the course he chooses is
the right one, and that belief needs no further justification. But if
the laws or customs are at all ambivalent or ambiguous concerning
this type of case, different skeptics might have different beliefs.
Differing beliefs would lead to differing responses, and to poten-
tially conflicting political positions in general.

From Frede's picture of skepticism, we might conceive of a pol-
itical community in which skeptics can live their skepticism by
living in accordance with their beliefs. If the skeptics are living
with dogmatists, they will have to keep an eye on the excessive
claims that dogmatists may be expected to make. If there are noth-
ing but skeptics, then they will live in some kind of conflict or
coordination of each one's unjustified beliefs.

Presumeably, each skeptic recognizes that his or her beliefs may
be wrong, and this may lend a certain reticence or tentativeness to
political initiatives. The attitude of the skeptic will be less
authoritative than that of the dogmatist, but that does not neces-
sarily mean that conflict would be less vigorous. Each skeptic also
recognizes that the others may be wrong, and this may make it
easier for him or her to oppose or try to change those beliefs. Thus,
there is nothing in Frede's account that prevents the politics of
skepticism from being a politics of clashes of belief, and by no
means necessarily a politics of quietism and social tranquillity. In
this respect the politics of ancient skepticism could bear analogies
to the pluralism of modern liberalism.

If all that skeptics have to go on is unjustified beliefs, everything
will turn on the dynamics of belief. As in modern liberal politics,
those who learn how to manipulate beliefs will control the processes
of politics. If beliefs cannot be manipulated by humans, then
politics will be hostage to the rigidities or the ebbs and flows of
beliefs, whatever their causes.

A politics of belief is not necessarily inconsistent with most of the
other elements of liberalism. The rule of law is still possible, as
long as significant numbers of people believe it is worthwhile.
Representative government and active political participation (includ-
ing opposition to tyrants) are still possible, again as long as beliefs

support them. Everything will depend on unjustified beliefs, and if beliefs turn against liberalism, that will be the end of it. This is very much in the spirit of "political culture" theory, which holds that features of liberalism such as representative government can survive only where beliefs support them, and cannot be forced on unprepared populations.

In a later article, Frede reaffirmed his position, redescribing it as a difference between the skeptic "having a view" and the dogmatist "making a claim". There, he emphasized that the skeptic never argues for his own position, but rather always uses one dogmatic claim against another. The skeptic is not even committed to the position that one *should* withhold assent, which would be a dogmatic position. Nor should the skeptical accounts of the practical criterion, Frede warns, be taken as approval of that criterion: it may be no more than a polemical strategy to disarm critics. The skeptic works from a position he "finds himself stranded with, not a position he is out to demonstrate, to establish, to defend".[10] If the same could be said for the skeptic's politics, it will certainly have an *ad hoc* quality about it. This interpretation draws on the image of Socrates as gadfly, parasitic upon the pretensions of others, and perhaps lacking any program at all in the absence of dogmatists. We shall review another version of this view of ancient skepticism below.

Looking ahead, we will see in later chapters that David Hume centered a good deal of his attention on the political implications of living with nothing more than beliefs. Immanuel Kant based his ethics and liberal politics on the notion of justified belief. The latter figure specifically distinguished the beliefs of politics from scientific knowledge. If Frede is right, the genealogy of this distinction can be traced back to the distinction between the beliefs about how-things-are of the skeptic and the beliefs about how-things-really-are of the dogmatist.

## 2. *Burnyeat's life without beliefs and the disturbing inconsistency*

Myles Burnyeat's answer to the question, "Can the skeptic live his skepticism?", appeared in 1980. He began with the argument that

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[10] Frede, "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge", pp. 257-60, 267.

all of the skeptics' attacks on knowledge apply as well to beliefs. In direct opposition to Frede's reading, Burnyeat argued that Sextus defends the proposition that the skeptic "should, can, and does give up his beliefs in response to the skeptical arguments".[11] *Epochē*, in Burnyeat's analysis, is suspension of judgment *and* belief.

Burnyeat resuscitated the distinction that Frede had collapsed between appearances and beliefs about how-things-are. He pointed out that in skeptical usage beliefs do not apply to statements recording appearances, since the latter cannot be true or false. Beliefs apply only to real existences, which all of the skeptical arguments undermine. Thus, appearances cannot underwrite beliefs, and there is no such epistemological status as Frede's belief about how-things-are that is not about how-things-really-are. In answer to Frede's invocation of Sextus's distinction between meanings of "dogma" at PH I 13 and the many places where Sextus says he suspends judgment (only) about how things are "in nature", Burnyeat invokes Sextus's statement at PH I 15. There, he takes it that Sextus confirms that appearances do not create beliefs: the skeptic "states what appears to himself and announces his own experience *without belief*, making no assertion about external things" (emphasis supplied). For Burnyeat, Frede's beliefs about how-things-are that are not about how-things-really-are are in fact non-epistemic, and thus not really beliefs. They are not statements about how things are, but rather only about how they appear.[12]

Another problem with Frede's distinction, according to Burnyeat, is that if skeptics hold beliefs, skepticism is not doing the work that Sextus wants it to do. The disturbances that the skeptic seeks to prevent can presumably be created by any type of belief, he argues. Thus, undercutting only the scientific pretensions of those who claim that they know how-things-really-are would not undercut the ordinary man's hopes and fears. But this is precisely what Burnyeat thinks Sextus wants to do: to create *ataraxia* in the ordinary man concerning the "ordinary belief that it is good and desireable to

[11] Burnyeat, "Can the Skeptic Live His Skepticism?", in Schofield, Burnyeat, and Barnes, eds., *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology*; cited as reprinted in Burnyeat, ed., *The Skeptical Tradition*, p. 119.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 121-2, 135-6.

have money, say, or fame or pleasure, and bad to be without them".[13] As long as any beliefs remain, this cannot be done.

According to Burnyeat, the answer of the Pyrrhonists to questions about living without belief is to keep to appearances. "The criterion by which [the skeptic] lives his life is appearance".[14] In this analysis, Sextus's rules for living are rules about living with appearances. The skeptics have no beliefs about justice or injustice, and no belief one way or the other about institutions such as slavery. Anything they say about such matters is nothing more than a report on appearances.

Among other implications, Burnyeat observes that "how a thing appears or seems is authoritatively answered by each individual". Reports on appearances cannot be challenged and need no proof. The skeptic is "withdrawing to the safety of a position not open to challenge or inquiry".[15] Burnyeat seems to imply that it is not open to persuasion, either, although that may be an unwarranted implication. In any case, a politics of appearances would not be a politics of the sort of debate in which one could change another's position simply by challenging his or her reports on appearances. From the point of view of liberalism, this may have the positive implication of opening up a space for individualism.

Burnyeat agrees with Frede that the difference between the skeptic and the dogmatist is a difference in attitude. But for Burnyeat, this difference is that living by appearances implies a "detachment from oneself", which amounts to an "ultimate incoherence".[16] Passive, detached from the self, the skeptic will be drained of any emotions that derive from reason and thought. Burnyeat's critique is apparently based on an unexamined philosophical psychology that holds that there is such a thing as a self,[17] that detachment from it is ultimately incoherent, and that we need emotions that are derived from reason and thought. However, none of this is established with

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 126.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 128.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

[17] In a later article, Burnyeat elaborates on the target of the skeptics as "our innermost selves" ("The Sceptic in His Place and Time", p. 242). Burnyeat's formulations are at least as vulnerable as any liberal's idea of the self to critics like Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice.*

any argument, and the skeptics surely would have questioned his assumptions.

Taking up Sextus's political example, Burnyeat concludes that if "a tyrant sends a message that you and your family are to perish at dawn unless you commit some unspeakable deed, the true skeptic will be undisturbed both about whether the message is true or false and about whether it would be a good thing or a bad thing to comply with the command". The skeptic will simply do "whatever he has been brought up to do"; but "the point is that he does not identify with the values involved".[18] Burnyeat's philosophical psychology evidently includes an unexamined theory of value identification as well.

The flaw in Sextus's reasoning, according to Burnyeat, is that in fact the skeptic *does* believe at least one thing: that the reasons for and against assertions of truth are equally balanced. This "appearance, so called, being the effect of argument, is only to be made sense of in terms of reason, belief, and truth--the very notions the skeptic is most anxious to avoid".[19] One cannot treat arguments in the same way that one treats sense data as appearances that are only felt but not believed, at least not in all cases. If the skeptic does not believe that opposed arguments are equipollent, then what is to stop him or her from believing one or the other of them? This is not a problem for Frede, who agrees that the skeptic may hold this belief and perhaps many others. But for Burnyeat, it means that Sextus's claim to describe a life without belief is a failure.

Burnyeat's conclusion is that "the supposed life without belief is not, after all, a possible life for man".[20] He is not saying that the skeptics will walk off cliffs, but rather that by their own logic the only way they can keep themselves from believing the dogmatists' arguments is by believing their own arguments. But believing anything at all defeats their purposes, in Burnyeat's analysis of those purposes. This is Burnyeat's version of the problem of the self-referentiality of skeptical arguments.

Thus, not only is Burnyeat's skeptic lost in a sort of Never-Never Land of passivity and detachment from self, but he or she is also

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[18] Burnyeat, "Can the Skeptic...?", pp. 131, 132.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

inescapably inconsistent. This implies a certain arbitrariness or hypocrisy, in which willy-nilly one belief is accepted and all others are rejected. A similar arbitrariness or hypocrisy would have to underlie any politics that that belief engendered. Skeptical political argumentation which thrives on destroying other beliefs would itself be anchored in a belief that can have no claim to privilege. Nevertheless, there is nothing unusual about hypocrisy and arbitrariness in politics, and Burnyeat's objection to inconsistency cannot mean that skeptics cannot try to live by their ultimately inconsistent theory.

Where Frede's interpretation would sustain a politics of many beliefs, Burnyeat's implies a politics of only one belief. But the inconsistency of retaining only one belief implies that the full benefits of *ataraxia* cannot be obtained. Why wouldn't that belief engender disturbance? Is it only a contingent historical fact that having only one belief makes the skeptics tranquil? If so, the skeptic would have no answer to someone who said that the one belief of skepticism is indeed disturbing.

An implication for politics of the holding of one belief is that it could lead to a politics of crusading efforts to convert all others to that belief, rather than to the conventionalism that the skeptics were said to have espoused. Such a politics would draw on the skeptics' evident obsession with deflating the pretensions of all dogmatists. Paradoxically, it could be an intolerant politics of dogmatic skepticism, or at least of a skepticism that is dogmatic on the one point. In a similar fashion, modern liberalism has been accused of crusading on its own behalf under cover of the supposedly neutral values of tolerance, openness, and pluralism.[21]

As for the other elements of liberalism, skeptics could not *believe* that they were useful or right. But that does not mean that they could not live by them. If skeptics live by prevailing customs, they will be liberals if that is the prevailing custom. They may even be more steadfast in their liberalism than dogmatic liberals, because their position cannot be undermined by subverting any beliefs. On the other hand, if customs evolve away from liberalism, they will not be anchored to liberal customs by any beliefs.

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[21] See, e.g., Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance", in Wolff, Moore, and Marcuse, eds., *A Critique of Pure Tolerance.*

In 1984, Burnyeat returned to the question, this time emphasizing the lack of "insulation" between the ancient skeptics' theory of knowledge and the sphere of everyday living. He stressed that skeptical tranquillity is a sort of emotional numbness in which "you cease to want anything, or to hope for anything, or to fear anything".[22] Going far beyond the earlier claim of an inconsistency, this latter charge amounts to a version of the view that the skeptic could not live his skepticism because he would not feed himself, would walk off of cliffs, and so forth, from sheer lack of desire. The point about insulation serves to reinforce the point that skepticism could not be isolated from politics for the ancients, and if Burnyeat is right about ceasing to want, hope, or fear, then politics as we know it could hardly take place.

But Burnyeat's charge is contradicted by the skeptics' answers, from Aenesidemus onwards, that they lived like ordinary folks. Sextus insisted that "as regards the non-philosophical regulation of life [the skeptic] is capable of desiring some things and avoiding others" (M XI 165). A more refined version of Burnyeat's claim may be that skeptics cease to want, hope, or fear anything insofar as such emotions are based on truths or knowledge or justified beliefs. But that would not rule out *any* want, hope, or fear, and thus would not prove that the skeptic could not even try to live a politics of skepticism.

## 3. *Barnes and the politics of therapy*

Jonathan Barnes's intervention in the debate in 1982 took a different tack. Distancing himself from both Frede and Burnyeat, he argued that the skeptic "neither believes nor disbelieves". *Epochē* is not caused by a belief that opposing arguments are equipollent; rather, it is "something which simply *happens* to us". Pyrrhonist reports about appearances are thus speech act "avowals", to use the Wittgensteinian term, and avowals "by-pass belief".[23]

In addition, Barnes argues, Pyrrhonism "works piecemeal": it "is not a global state... rather, it is a particular attitude, essentially directed towards some specific issue". *Epochē* "on one issue does not imply *epochē* on any other issue". A natural question, then, is

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[22] Burnyeat, "The Skeptic in His Place...", p. 241 .
[23] Barnes, "The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist", pp. 1, 5.

"to ask where -over what range of topics- a Pyrrhonist will exercise" his or her skills at creating equipollence, *epochē*, and *ataraxia*.[24]

Barnes begins his answer with a distinction, taken from Galen, between the "rustic" and the "urbane" Pyrrhonist. The rustic Pyrrhonist has no beliefs, and "directs *epochē* towards every issue that may arise".[25] The urbane Pyrrhonist believes most things that ordinary people assent to, but directs his or her *epochē* against philosophical or scientific doctrines.

In order to decide which of the foregoing types Sextus belongs to in the PH, Barnes analyzes the term *dogma* and its associated vocabulary. The word was used by the ancients in essentially two ways. One of these was in philosophical and theological discourse, with *dogmata* like "the soul is immortal". The other was in what Barnes calls political or evaluative contexts, with government decrees at one end of the spectrum, and Stoic practical advice at the other.[26] Sextus's rejection of *dogmata* in these two senses would not preclude the holding of other beliefs, such as everyday beliefs about geography, the temperature of bathwater, or the time of day. Thus, the Pyrrhonist could be urbane, rejecting the philosophical and political *dogmata*, but still hold many ordinary beliefs.

Thus far, Barnes's interpretation is consistent with Frede's, with Barnes's everyday beliefs roughly equated to Frede's beliefs about how-things-are, and Barnes's philosophical and political *dogmata* roughly the same as Frede's beliefs about how-things-really-are. But Barnes has another argument to prove that Sextus must be a rustic, with no beliefs at all. Sextus's attack on dogmatic logic undermines any claim to have a criterion of truth. But, Barnes says, a "Pyrrhonist will only believe that the water is tepid if he judges it to be so; and he can only judge it to be so if he possesses a criterion of truth". Hence, "the Pyrrhonist of *PH* will have no ordinary beliefs at all"; for "the possession of ordinary beliefs presupposes the

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[24] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7. Barnes's discussion of the political meaning of *dogma* suggests a reason why the Pyrrhonists may have been perceived as politically subversive. If a core meaning of *dogma* was "decree", and most of Plato's uses of the word were political, as Barnes reports, then the skeptics' continual critique of *dogmata* may have had a distinctly anti-establishment ring.

possession of at least one *dogma* -the *dogma* that there is a criterion of truth".[27] Barnes argues that the Pyrrhonist does not acknowledge any such criterion. This makes him a rustic.

It certainly seems like something has gone wrong with the logic here. Barnes had started by saying that skeptic utterances were no more than avowals: why must the skeptic's report on the temperature of the water be more than an avowal? Barnes had gone on to show that Pyrrhonism works piecemeal: why would Sextus's attack on dogmatic logic necessarily affect his ordinary beliefs? And why should the Pyrrhonist believe something only if he or she has a criterion of truth? Isn't that a dogmatic standard for belief, to which the Pyrrhonist need not be committed? It turns out that Barnes has an answer to these questions, but first he isolates yet another version of the claim that the skeptic does have beliefs.

As we have seen, Sextus provides us with the skeptics' rules for living. Barnes argues that either Sextus is being disingenuous or that at least some of those rules imply belief. When the Pyrrhonists *say* "that there are gods and we revere the gods" (quoting Sextus), either they also believe that there are gods, or they are misleading their listeners. When the Pyrrhonists use recollective signs and "struggle at the side of ordinary life", again either they also believe that smoke means fire, or they are being disingenuous and not in fact sharing the beliefs of ordinary life.[28] Thus, either they are disingenuous rustics, hiding their lack of beliefs, or they are urbane skeptics, who do hold some beliefs.

Nevertheless, all of this dissolves in Barnes's concluding discovery that the whole question of rusticity vs. urbanity is not the right question. Since Pyrrhonism is designed as a therapy for the inquietude created by opposing arguments, it need only be as broad in its creation of *epochē* as that inquietude. The Pyrrhonist and his or her patients may very well hold beliefs, but if those beliefs do not produce any disturbance, there is no need to apply *epochē* to them. If beliefs are producing inquietude across the board, the skeptic may have to behave in rustic fashion; but if the only beliefs that create disturbances are philosophical and scientific beliefs, the skeptic can limit his or her practices to urbane skepticism. Thus,

[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.
[28] *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

Barnes writes, "we need not accept that *PH* is inconsistent or incoherent or indefinite in its attitude to the scope of *epochē*".[29] Rather, Pyrrhonism is as broad as it has to be to accomplish its goal of creating *ataraxia*.

It should be clear that Barnes's interpretation turns on a particular understanding of the kind of inquietude or disturbance that the skeptics were concerned to attack. Unlike Burnyeat, who observed that the skeptics tried to undermine all of the ordinary beliefs of ordinary people, Barnes interprets Sextus to the effect that the skeptics were only concerned with the inquietudes created by conflicting beliefs.[30] Thus, one can imagine the skeptic engaging in fervent, even violent, political activities, as long as he or she has been relieved of the kind of doubts created by opposing arguments or beliefs.

On this reading, beliefs about justice and injustice and about institutions such as slavery are perfectly acceptable as long as they are harmless in the sense of not creating anxieties. Burnyeat had suggested that any belief can cause mental disturbances, but Barnes answered that as long as a belief does not in fact create such a disturbance, the skeptic will not be concerned with it. As long as people are not disturbed by the one belief that all other arguments are equipollent, then the skeptics may continue to maintain that belief without need of subjecting it to *epochē*. Burnyeat's inconsistency is not a problem unless it creates a disturbance.

Barnes's solution also depends upon people not reacting to equipollence with disturbance or anxiety. The skeptics reported that when they saw equipollence and suspended judgment, it created tranquillity for them. But if the equipollence were to create disturbance in the skeptic or someone else, skeptical therapy would require that skeptical tools be trained on that as well, in order to create *ataraxia*. Destroying Burnyeat's one belief might resurrect other beliefs, and if any of them create disturbances, the skeptic would have to get to work on them, producing equipollence, *epochē*, and *ataraxia*. It is at least conceivable that the skeptic could never get off of this treadmill of endless, self-referential therapy. On this account, skepticism only works when it elicits an

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[29] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 18, citing PH I 12.

avowal of *ataraxia*.

Accordingly, Barnes's best answer to the question about Sextus's tyrant would focus on the disturbance and anxiety created by the tyrant's order. If the tyrant's command creates no mental disturbance, and the skeptic sees his or her way to any form of action (or inaction) calmly and clearly, then there is no need for *epoché*. If, however, some disturbance is created, the skeptic will concentrate on defusing that disturbance. The *right* answer to the tyrant would not be the goal of the skeptic; rather, the focus would be on the creation of *ataraxia*, whatever the answer. Political argumentation in all its forms would be directed toward this kind of therapy, rather than persuasion or truth.

Pyrrhonism as therapy[31] implies that unexamined, uncontested, taken-for-granted beliefs are fine. The skeptical techniques are needed only if beliefs cause a particular kind of disturbance and anxiety. If disturbing doubts arise, the Pyrrhonist solution is to push those doubts through to equipollence, which will create *epoché* and thus *ataraxia*.

From the point of view of liberalism, skepticism in Barnes's interpretation has taken a turn for the worse. Portions of Barnes's version are probably not inconsistent with liberal politics, but the emphasis on tranquillity as a goal does have certain illiberal implications. By many accounts, liberalism is supposed to mediate among people who may hold disturbing, ambivalent beliefs, and not to defuse those beliefs. Recent work on the model of "therapy" in modern politics has indicated some of the dangers for liberalism, and some of them may follow from ancient therapy as well.[32] In fact, liberalism may thrive on just the kind of inquietude Barnes thinks the skeptics were trying to eliminate. It is certainly possible that undisturbed politicians in the ancient sense may be more effective than those who are subject to disquieting doubts. But if all political actors were calmly satisfied and none were disturbed by questions about their own beliefs, politics would lose a certain richness.

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[31] For an elaboration on this theme, see Cohen, "Sextus Empiricus: Skepticism as a Therapy".

[32] See Bellah, et.al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*; and the classic novel by Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*.

## 4. *Stough on non-assertion and the fatal insight*

In a 1984 article, Charlotte Stough staked out a fourth variation on the theme of skepticism, agreeing in some respects with each of the preceding accounts, and disagreeing with them in others.[33] She centered her discussion around the distinction between assertion and non-assertion. This is the basis of Sextus's puzzling claim that skeptics can utter exactly the same words as dogmatists, but when they do, they are not dogmatizing, not making any positive claims, neither affirming nor denying, and in all things adopting a posture of non-assertion. What kind of discourse is this?

Stough's answer is that the "distinction between assertion and non-assertion marks off categories of *speech* rather than kinds of things. It creates a new kind of discourse 'peculiar' to the Sceptic".[34] An assertion is descriptive of the world, but non-assertion is non-descriptive (and hence, as Burnyeat had pointed out, not open to dispute). The language of non-assertion is the language of appearance: as Sextus writes, whenever the skeptics say "is" they mean "appears" or "seems" (e.g. PH I 135, 203, etc.).

The appearance, according to Stough, is not a criterion of truth, but rather a criterion of action. Although Stough claims that Frede creates confusion by assimilating the criterion of truth to that of action,[35] in fact her distinction parallels in some ways Frede's distinction between beliefs about how-things-really-are and beliefs about how-things-are. It is enough, for the skeptic to act, if something is apparent. This is consistent with Sextus's frequent references to skepticism as a way of life, and means that the skeptic approves of the practical functions of language. On this account, the skeptic can have beliefs in a broad sense, where "holding a belief amounts to no more than being persuaded and acting accordingly". Everything turns on the definition of belief. "What Sextus means to deny is that the Sceptic has beliefs in a sense in which acting this way or that is not a sufficient condition of having a belief".[36]

For politics, this reading implies some of the same things that we

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[33] Stough, "Sextus Empiricus on Non-assertion". This article modifies in important respects Stough's earlier *Greek Skepticism*.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 143.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 146 n. 16.

[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 158-9.

saw in Frede's account. The skeptic would be free to hold political beliefs concerning slavery, justice and injustice, and so forth. Holding such beliefs can mean acting on them, but always with the reservation that although belief and action can mutually imply each other they imply nothing else. As in Burnyeat's account, no one could dispute with others with any claim to truth, or otherwise privileged beliefs. As in most of the previous interpretations, there is nothing to prevent a vigorous politics, but it must be a politics of non-assertion in Sextus's sense.

In the tradition of Barnes's account of skepticism as a therapy, Stough reminds us that Sextus usually insists that skepticism as a way of life is not a "philosophy", but rather a "position". But problems begin with the observation that "one cannot explain non-assertive discourse in the language of non-assertion". Sextus is perfectly satisfied to admit that his "speech, construed as assertion, is self-refuting", which raises the problem of self-referentiality again. In Sextus's view, "once his account is understood, it is no longer necessary". But Stough concludes that this "has more serious overtones for Scepticism as a way of life than Sextus apparently thought".[37]

The problem, in a nutshell, is that in spite of Sextus's best intentions, skepticism *is* a philosophy. Stough quotes Sextus's description of the skeptic way of life as following "a certain *logos*", as a reminder that the skeptics themselves denied that they were irrational. Further exploration turns up more examples of the skeptics' reliance on reasoning. Stough may go too far in characterizing some of this as the skeptic's philosophy. For example, she writes that Sextus is "conceding" the validity of the idea of logical consistency at a point where he uses it, but he may be doing no more than using the dogmatists' premises against them. She writes of "logical principles which the Sceptic must accept as a speaker of a shared language", apparently unwilling to push the implications of her earlier point that the skeptics created a new and peculiar shared use of language.[38]

Nevertheless, the problem emerges in its starkest form when the question is asked, "what does this difference actually come to, if in

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[37] *Ibid.*, p. 144n.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 156, cf. p. 143.

life he acts no differently from others?". The skeptic may very well act differently from those who believe, e.g., that some things are good and some things are bad by nature, but "he will not act differently from someone who holds a belief that *nothing* is good or bad by nature", Stough asserts. In general, then, the "distinction between assertion and non-assertion (philosophical position and way of life) thus has no discernable consequences" and skepticism "as a way of life distinct from dogmatism shows signs of breaking down". This means that if "the difference between the Sceptic and the negative dogmatist is real, it must be a *theoretical* distinction that divides them". Skepticism, Stough argues, "is in fact a highly theoretical metalinguistic 'position' interpreting the Sceptic's discourse as expressive and regulative in function". As such, it "cannot do away with dogmatism without destroying its own theoretical foundations".[39]

Thus, Stough's position goes beyond Burnyeat's in amounting to a claim that the skeptical position or philosophy is not just inconsistent but fundamentally incoherent. Burnyeat is wrong, she says, to think that the skeptic cannot avoid the one disturbing belief that arguments are equal, because in fact the skeptic's response to equipollence does not require "making any claim that they are in fact equally credible".[40] But Stough herself is making the larger claim that the skeptical way of life can only be explained by a philosophy that is incoherent because it is self-referential.

What are the implications of this self-referentiality for politics? There still may be a politics of the skeptic trying to live in accordance with an incoherent theory. Suppose the skeptic is faced with the dilemma of the tyrant. He or she starts by believing enough to decide on some course of action. That action can only be defended in terms of appearances and non-assertion, whether they be about justice and injustice, or some other standard. But the skeptic does not yet need anything more.

The problem arises when the skeptic is challenged to explain how his or her action is any different from that of a negative dogmatist

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[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 158, 158 n. 31, 161-3. In these passages, Stough contrasts the Pyrrhonist with the "Academic who holds the dogmatic belief that contrary claims are equally strong" (p. 162).

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 140.

or dogmatic skeptic who engages in the same action but claims that he does so in part because he *knows* that no action is intrinsically just or unjust. The only way to establish a difference would be for the skeptic to express the 'highly theoretical metalinguistic position' reviewed above. But in the very expressing of it, it refutes itself, and the incoherence emerges.

What does it matter that such an incoherence emerges? Stough writes that Sextus "does not seem to have recognized the fatal implications of that insight for Scepticism as a way of life".[41] It certainly does not seem to have bothered Sextus, who described scepticism as a cathartic that is ejected as soon as it has done its work (PH I 206, II 188). Stough knows this, so she is accusing Sextus of failing to fully appreciate its importance. But what does it matter if the skeptic does or does not appreciate this incoherence? As Sextus describes it, the only thing that matters is that skepticism works.

Perhaps Stough is saying that skepticism will not work if the skeptic eventually realizes that he has been living with an incoherent theory (in the special sense of incoherence as self-refutation). Perhaps she is saying that such a realization may be disturbing, or that skepticism will not work as a therapy for those who really appreciate that it is self-refuting. Perhaps she is making the Wittgensteinian point that if they act the same and say the same things, no purported differences in the "mental world" can justifiably be cited to distinguish between real skeptics and negative dogmatists.

But as Sextus describes it, there *is* a difference between skeptics and negative dogmatists. Negative dogmatists justify their responses to the tyrant in part by claiming that they cannot be held to a standard of justice because justice and injustice do not exist in nature, period. The real, Pyrrhonian skeptic, however, will respond to any challenge with an expression of the skeptics' 'highly theoretical metalinguistic position'. It is true that by the time the skeptic is finished expressing it, it refutes itself. But in the meantime there has been a behavioral and a philosophical difference between the two kinds of skeptics. The real skeptic has been forced to articulate a skeptical theory that would undermine any dogmatic theories,

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[41] *Ibid.*, p. 163.

including that of the dogmatic skeptic. If we take Sextus seriously, his articulation of this theory eventually leads the skeptic to tranquillity. There is no reason why the real, Pyrrhonian skeptic cannot survive the self-referential demolition of his own theory, whereas the dogmatic skeptic presumably cannot.

A politics based on a self-destructive theory may well be characterized as incoherent in some theoretical sense. But Stough, at least, has given us no reason to believe that we cannot live by such a politics. By the skeptics' own account, they can live a skeptical politics, generally following custom but bringing up their 'highly theoretical metalinguistic position' whenever dogmatic positions are asserted.

In Stough's account as in Barnes's, skepticism rules out disquiet and disturbance by ruling out pretensions to knowledge and the ambivalence they can create. Without such disturbances, we can imagine the skeptics maintaining their mental tranquillity even as they engage in a hurly-burly politics. As in Barnes's account, however, they would be deprived of the richness that disquiet and ambivalence provide to liberal politics.

In Stough's account as in Frede's, skeptics could uphold the liberal rule of law and participate in representative government based on the belief that they are worthwhile. They would have no answer other than their own interpretation of appearances to those who claimed that liberalism did not appear to be the best form of political life. But they would have a 'highly theoretical metalinguistic position' with which to defend it against anyone who claimed that he or she knew that liberalism was wrong. However, the same could be said for any political position that a skeptic might take. If politics is grounded only in appearances, it is highly contingent upon what those appearances happen to be. The 'highly theoretical metalinguistic position' can be used in the service of virtually any politics that does not depend on dogmatic claims.

## PART TWO: THE PRACTICAL TURN

Up to this point, the debate that we have been following has been carried out largely in terms of epistemology. Frede's account implies a life in accordance with beliefs. Burnyeat and Stough accuse the skeptics of inconsistency and incoherence, but neither

shows that a life and politics of trying to live with such logical flaws is impossible. Although most of his article concerns epistemological issues, Barnes's conclusion begins to move the argument in the direction of understanding skepticism as more of a practice than an epistemology. Other recent authors have moved further in that direction, focusing specifically on the practical dimension of skepticism.

### 1. *Annas and the contingency of the skeptic's stance*

In a 1986 article, Julia Annas quotes Aristocles's question: "What kind of citizen... or judge or counsellor or friend can the sceptic be - in fact, what kind of person? What evil thing would he not dare do, seeing that he thinks nothing to be really bad or shameful, just or unjust?" The skeptics' answer is simply that the skeptics follow custom and the moral intuitions that happen to recommend themselves to them, without ever claiming that they are right in a deeper sense. "But this is a disturbing answer, and one which casts doubt on the claim that the skeptic lives an *ordinary* life", Annas observes. The skeptic may or may not respond with the right action to the tyrant's command, but whatever he does is "an essentially *uncritical* response."[42]

Accordingly, Annas asserts, there is an "immense split between scepticism and ordinary life" in respect to understanding morals. Evidently hypothesizing a standard modern moral outlook, she writes that "we do not think of our moral intuitions and principles this way, as just happening to be there"; "we are engaged in our acceptance or rejection of... reasons of varying kinds for our moral responses". She questions whether skeptics can "retain the notions of *laws* and *moral* intuitions" at all. Following Burnyeat, she writes of a "radical" detachment from ordinary life, and observes that "the sceptic might simply come to lack the sense of self that we take for granted". The upshot is that skepticism "precludes any half-way serious practical commitment to any moral project".[43]

Annas seems to be working from a rather elevated account of ordinary life that may not be justified by actual moral practice. In addition, her claims about the self are vulnerable to the same ob-

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[42] Annas, "Doing Without Objective Values", p. 20.
[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

jections as Burnyeat's: just exactly what sense of the self *do* we take for granted? Skeptics certainly do "engage" with reasons for moral responses, even if that is mostly to set them into opposition to each other.

If Annas is right, and political participation requires a "half-way serious practical commitment to a moral project", then the skeptic cannot be a serious political actor. This may not stop him, of course, from being a less-than-serious politician. Less than committed to his or her moral project, the skeptical politician may well change positions as interests or even whims dictate. We all know politicians like this. But skeptics may not have to admit that they are less than serious. In parallel with Stough's account of the skeptics' beliefs, the skeptics might say that morals and action imply each other, and nothing else. If they act well, no further commitments are needed. Naturally, there is no privileged standard for what acting well is. The skeptics may or may not act in support of liberal politics, and whether or not they do will be purely contingent.

Similarly, skeptics may not apply the full notion of laws and moral intuitions to their own behavior, but if dogmatists continue to exist, there is no reason why skeptics should not understand how the notion applies to them. It also seems rather likely that the skeptics would adapt the dogmatic moral vocabulary to their own practice, and understand it *mutatis mutandis*. Stough described skeptical language as a 'peculiar' discourse, but it may in fact be close to what much of modernity is already using.

Two quandaries that Annas raises may have political implications as well. Recall that the skeptics found that they reached tranquillity when they suspended judgment about opposing arguments. Is this purely a contingent factor of the make-up of their personalities? What about people who say that suspending judgment makes them nervous, and that holding firm beliefs makes them tranquil? As Annas puts it, the ancient skeptics never explain "why belief in objective values should bring anxiety rather than, say, a sense of security".[44] What would politics be like in a community in which some people seek firm beliefs and others try to avoid them, both in pursuit of tranquillity? Interestingly enough, it may be not unlike

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[44] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

modern liberal polities, which include a wide range of believers and non-believers.

The second quandary is that the skeptic also claimed to follow custom and the moral intuitions that he found natural. Why? "The answer has to be: there is no *should* about it. He just does".[45] Again, is this wholly contingent? What about people who do not happen to follow customs and their moral inclinations? What would politics be like if some people are following customs and their moral inclinations and others are not? Again, this description appears to characterize modern liberal society pretty well. Some may participate in politics and some not, some may follow customs and the laws and others may break them.

The upshot of Annas's analysis is that a skeptical politics would be limited by the lack of "seriousness" of its moral commitments and contingent upon the psychological make-up of its participants. Later contributions to the debate provide further perspectives on these questions.

## 2. *McPherran on timing, intensity, and "private goods"*

In a 1987 article, Mark McPherran characterized skeptical therapy as "homeopathy", in analogy to the medical practice in which a disease is treated by administration of doses of a remedy that would produce the disease in healthy persons. Thus, the skeptic provides doses of anxiety-provoking argument up to the point at which the previously anxious patient recognizes the equipollence of arguments, suspends judgment, and finds him- or herself free of anxieties. As McPherran describes it, skeptical homeopathy is perfectly consistent with its own self-refutation.[46]

Facing the charges of inconsistency and incoherence levelled by critics, McPherran observes that Sextus's metaphors for skeptical self-refutation all include a temporal element. First you climb the ladder, then you kick it over; first the purgative cleans the bowels, then it ejects itself; first the fire consumes the fuel, then it consumes itself. Each metaphor provides for a "temporal gap", and McPherran contends that Sextus's description of skeptical practices can be read in the same way. The skeptics can live their skepticism

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[45] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
[46] McPherran, "Skeptical Homeopathy and Self-refutation", pp. 290-328.

without inconsistency or incoherence if the skeptical arguments first destroy dogmatic claims, and then destroy themselves.[47]

A focus on timing reminds us that skepticism was a practice born in dialectical context, rather than an epistemology. Why is the skeptic involved in this practice? Here, McPherran rejects the notion that the skeptic must believe dogmatically that *ataraxia* is a natural *telos*, normatively good. He follows Annas in suggesting that Pyrrhonism may involve no more than a contingent "decision to pursue what *seems to be* his and some other kindred spirits' natural *telos*". There is "no 'should' about it"; but "we can imagine that it might well interfere with a Skeptic's *ataraxia* not to be doing something to reduce the amount of *tarache* in those whose lives he come into contact with".[48]

This last point raises something new. Why would a skeptic care about other people's anxieties? Here, McPherran draws on Sextus's report that the skeptic *loves* his kind. This is a "calm, confident, tolerant, and gentle love", and explains how a skeptic can have attachment to values (*contra* Burnyeat) and serious commitments to moral projects (*contra* Annas).[49] But surely such a love is very much an historical contingency, and without it the skeptic's behavior certainly could be wholly egoistic.

McPherran is careful to note that the skeptic's love is moderate; and that he must seek *ataraxia* without "real intensity", or "that very intensity together with the exigencies of life and the un-reliability of human reason might make freedom from anxiety ever elusive". And he expects that such moderation will have impli-cations for life: "a Skeptically moderated fear of death should result -*ceteris paribus*- in someone's being somewhat less inclined to flee a battle".[50] But one might just as well suspect that a skeptically moderated sense of duty would result in someone's being more inclined to flee a battle. Will the upshot then be exactly the same behavior?

[47] *Ibid.*, especially pp. 297-305, 312-19.

[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 324-5.

[49] *Ibid.*, pp. 325-26.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 325 nn. 78 and 80, p. 327 n. 85. McPherran observes at note 85 that the skeptical attitude is also manifested in "argumentative behavior". In note 86, he asks pertinent questions about Burnyeat's notion of the self.

In a later article, McPherran observes that believing "things for reasons and feeling things *intensely* are thus for Sextus not distinct processes" and that "hence, to remove the rational foundations of moral belief is to... diminish the intensity of the felt, motivational emotions". The "whole point of ancient Pyrrhonism" was to "secure a life free of the disturbing" passions. The skeptics traded intensity for a "smooth flow of life", and McPherran suggests that perhaps "the trade was a good one".[51] Read against this background, skeptical soldiers might or might not flee the battle, but whatever they do, they will do it less intensely.

Will their lessened intensity make the skeptics better or worse soldiers? As long as intensity is an unexamined category, any answer will depend on an intuitive sense of what it means. But taking the common sense notion that intensity is associated with anxiety, unremitting care, sleeplessness, and so forth, one likely answer would be that in some situations skeptical soldiers might be better, and in others worse. For contemporary purposes, the larger question is whether modern liberalism relies on intense commitments, or gets along without them. The likely answer again would be that intensity is helpful for some liberal purposes and harmful for others.[52]

In another article, McPherran added a helpful explanation of how the skeptic lives. Sextus writes at one point about "private goods", as distinguished from common goods (M XI 78). McPherran suggests that this is another way of describing that which appears good to each individual, and thus motivates each one. The fourfold rules for living, on this analysis, explain how one lives in accordance with one's own private, often-changing view of what is good. The skeptic has no belief about the good in some universal sense, but acts in accordance with what seems to be good at the time. What seems to be good is generally determined by nature, passions,

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[51] Mark McPherran, "Pyrrhonism's Arguments Against Value", pp. 138-9.

[52] In this connection, it is sobering to recall Yeats's characterization of post-World War I Europe: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / are full of passionate intensity" ("The Second Coming" [1921] in *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, vol. 1, *The Poems*, revised edition, ed. Richard Finneran [New York: Macmillan, 1989], p. 187).

customs, and laws.[53] This view stresses both individualism, turning each person back on his or her own resources, and community orientation, showing how much individuals owe to custom and law. As we shall see in the next chapter, Michel de Montaigne followed up on both of these dimensions.

### 3. *Williams and the priority of method*

Michael Williams's intervention in the debate in 1988 argued that ancient skepticism should not be analyzed into two components, one theoretical and the other practical. Rather, Pyrrhonism is wholly practical, and claims no theoretical basis. It is a technique and a method, not a philosophy. Agreeing with Stough and Annas, he asserts that "you have to have the knack. Thus, scepticism is not for everyone... Sextus never claims that one ought to suspend judgment or that it is wise to do so".[54] Following Barnes, Williams observes that skepticism is carried out on a case by case basis and "is a continuing rather than a completable project".[55] All of this is implied by Sextus's claim to be doing nothing more than reporting on skepticism "as a chronicler".

One of Williams's major contributions to the debate is his answer to the objection that the Modes of skepticism reported on by Sextus certainly appear to be epistemological arguments. They are not mere pointers for finding the equal and opposed appearances or judgments required by the skeptical method, but rather, read like theoretical arguments to the effect that knowledge *is* unattainable. But Williams argues cogently that Sextus is not committed to the Modes *as arguments*. On the contrary, they are best understood as further examples of Sextus's use of the skeptical method: if the dogmatists raise arguments to the effect that we can know things, Sextus will bring to bear an appropriate Mode that says that we cannot. This will create *isosthenia*. Sextus will not be left with a

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[53] McPherran, "Ataraxia and Eudaimonia in Ancient Pyrrhonism: Is the Skeptic Really Happy?", esp. pp. 143ff., 162.

[54] Williams, "Scepticism Without Theory", p. 556, 559. Williams points out at p. 565 that "Sextus does not explain how epoche induces ataraxia"; and "it may be that scepticism does not work for everybody".

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 558-9.

winning argument, but with *epochè* and *ataraxia*.[56]

The upshot of this analysis is that Sextus's account "does not imply any general passivity on the part of the sceptic"; in fact, "Sextus means to stress the primacy of action over ratiocination". *Epochè* suspends our judgment, but by no means our action, which is based on impulse and habit. Since the skeptic never needs a theory, Burnyeat is wrong to think that the skeptic cannot avoid epistemological convictions, and thus there is "no reason for thinking that scepticism is not a possible approach to life". Williams concludes by suggesting that Pyrrhonism works only in contexts in which no one theory has captured all observers, and that modern technology and natural science may have broken that condition. But even if we can no longer find equally convincing arguments on both sides of scientific questions, "there is still plenty of scope for the practice of *epochè*: in politics, for example, or philosophy".[57]

On this account, Pyrrhonism is the appropriate stance for modern politics if no theory about politics can be satisfactorily established, and in the face of contradictory theories we have no choice but to live by impulse and habit. Skeptical liberals would live by their liberal impulses and habits, but they would have no theoretical answer to those who lived a different politics in accordance with their impulses and habits. This may, of course, reflect the so-called post-modern condition.

## 4. *Ausland and Pyrrho's moralism*

Hayden Weir Ausland's 1989 study belongs in a somewhat different category from the rest of these essays, because it is an attempt to return to Pyrrho and the roots of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Based on a detailed analysis of the sources, he concludes that Pyrrho was primarily concerned with the ethical problem of happiness and "masterfully indifferent to the professional question regarding his supposed epistemological skepticism".[58] On this reading, all of the later treatments of Pyrrhonism as a theory of knowledge, from

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[56] *Ibid.*, pp. 578-9, 581.

[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 562, 582-3, 588.

[58] Ausland, "On the Moral Origin of the Pyrrhonian Philosophy", p. 434. For a similar treatment of Socrates's attitude toward epistemology, see Vlastos, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge", pp. 28-30.

Aristocles and Eusebius in ancient times to Hegel and nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship, have Pyrrho wrong. Pyrrho's goal, Ausland insists, was happiness, and anything he says about knowledge is subordinate to that goal.

Ausland's study undermines the essays discussed in Part One of this chapter by suggesting that Sextus's account of Pyrrhonism is misunderstood if it is read largely as an epistemological theory. If he is right, much of the epistemological material should be understood as subordinate to the ethical goals of the Pyrrhonist. Ausland disagrees on many points with Barnes, but his account of skepticism as an ethical practice in pursuit of happiness has a lot in common with Barnes's version of skepticism as a therapy.

If Ausland is right, what are the implications for politics? Ausland himself does not go into this, since his chief concern is to undermine the epistemological interpretation of Pyrrhonism. He does suggest, *inter alia*, that the skeptics' claims about living in accordance with the laws constitute a "distinctive view about the nature and constitution of law" and should be taken seriously as such.[59] The skeptics gave no philosophical justification for living in accordance with law, but they evidently found that it would lead to happiness. This certainly sounds compatible with the liberal rule of law.

Generalizing from this view of the law, Ausland's interpretation turns Pyrrhonism into a form of hedonism, concerned above all with achieving happiness. Any politics that is consistent with this goal would presumably be satisfactory, and the only warrant that the specific recommendations of the Pyrrhonists have is that in practice they make them tranquil, and happy. The other features of liberalism would meet the Pyrrhonists' standard if they make people happy.

Hedonism, of course, distances skepticism from alternative goals in politics such as republican virtue, natural law, and godliness. But it is also vulnerable to the kind of skeptical inquiry that we have seen above. Why *should* happiness be the proper goal of individuals and politics? With or without an answer to this question, hedonism is apparently a form of dogmatism. In many of its versions, modern liberalism shares this goal with Ausland's Pyrrhonism. Accordingly,

[59] *Ibid.*, p. 408.

it is vulnerable to the same skeptical questions.

## CONCLUSION

Skeptics can indeed live a skeptical politics, in most of the inter-
pretations that we have reviewed. It may not be a satisfactory pol-
itics for those who believe that politics should rest on truth or
knowledge, that politics must have a philosophical foundation, that
inconsistency and incoherence should have no place at the foun-
dations of politics, or that people and politics cannot thrive on
mental tranquillity. But these are not standards that the skeptics
would have accepted.

Our purpose has been to conduct a tour, as it were, of selected
recent philosophical interpretations of skepticism, in order to
suggest the range and subtlety of this debate, and of the possible
political implications that can be drawn out from it. On most of
these interpretations, it has emerged that skeptics could live an
active politics, arguably consistent with features of modern liberal-
ism. No stand has been taken on whether or not that is a good
thing.

We shall now turn to Michel de Montaigne's early modern adap-
tation of the skeptical tradition, and to the politics that it implied.

CHAPTER FOUR

# MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE AND THE POLITICS OF SKEPTICISM

When Henri Estienne and Gentian Hervet brought out Latin trans-
lations of the work of Sextus Empiricus in 1562 and 1569, they fig-
uratively set off a bombshell of ideas that had been virtually for-
gotten by the learned world.[1] Michel de Montaigne holds a crucial
place in the history of skepticism in early modern Europe because
he was one of the most influential members of the first generation
to become reacquainted with the work of Sextus Empiricus.

The politics of this great Gascon writer of the sixteenth century
was above all a politics of human fallibility. Again and again,
Montaigne's observations and recommendations concerning govern-
ment and politics focus on the weaknesses and limitations of human
beings. This vision of fallibility, in turn, is best understood as a
development of key categories, strategies, and vocabulary of the
ancient skeptics.

If it can be established that Montaigne's politics of human fall-
ibility belongs in the tradition of skepticism, this will be an im-
portant corrective of recent work that casts his politics as largely
Stoic or Epicurean. In addition, if it can be shown that Montaigne's
politics of skepticism was neither wholly conservative nor glibly
liberal, another set of common assumptions will be undermined. Fi-
nally, a careful analysis of Montaigne's work is significant in itself
as an example of one of the forms that a skeptical politics can take.

The ancient skepticism that had come down to Montaigne consist-
ed largely of the writings of Diogenes Laertius and Cicero, along
with the new translations of Sextus Empiricus. The new materials
from Sextus added a whole new dimension of breadth and depth to
what had been available from the other sources, and Montaigne was
one of the first to take advantage of them.

As we have seen in the foregoing chapters, Sextus's works dist-
inguished two types of skepticism, the Pyrrhonism of Pyrrho and

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[1] Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, pp. 19-20.

Aenesidemus, among others, and the Academic skepticism of Socrates, Arcesilaus, Carneades, and (although he did not mention him) Cicero. Particular strategies and arguments of individual skeptics will be reviewed below as they become relevant to Montaigne's politics.

A short survey of political languages that Montaigne does *not* use to any significant extent will help clear the ground for the claim that his politics was skeptical. Montaigne was trained as a jurist, but there is very little in his work of the categories or vocabulary of Roman law, in its ancient or early modern versions. As we shall see below, it appears largely as a foil for skeptical strategies. "(B) We were perplexed over Ulpian, we are still perplexed over Bartolus and Baldus. We should have wiped out the traces of this innumerable diversity of opinions...".[2]

Montaigne served as a magistrate, first at the Cour des Aides in Périgueux and then in the Parlement of Bordeaux, for more than fifteen years. He quoted Beza's poetry in the *Essays*, corresponded with Hotman and Du Plessis Mornay, and strolled with Pasquier at Blois, but he did not sympathize with or use the language of French constitutional history. His only remarks on the radical constitutionalist doctrine that peoples have the right to overthrow their kings were critical.

Montaigne was associated with the *politiques*, including L'Hôpital and Bodin, but he did not subscribe to anything resembling their versions of absolutism. He professed loyalty to his king, but he made it very clear that there were significant limits to that loyalty.

Montaigne received a classical education, learning Latin before he knew French, and cherished the Roman citizenship that he obtained. An early work of Montaigne's best friend, Etienne de La Boétie, entitled "On Voluntary Servitude," contains a substantial amount of civic humanist material, urging the value of civic virtue in the Roman republican tradition. Nevertheless, although Montaigne read this material and quoted Tacitus, Livy, Cicero, and other sources of this tradition, he rarely used them in a political, republican

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[2] Thibaudet and Rat, eds., *Montaigne*, p. 1044; Frame, trans., *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, p. 817. The translations have been borrowed, with some emendations, from the Frame edition. Further citations are in the text, with the French edition identified as "TR" and the English version identified as "F".

sense.[3] When he does use the vocabulary of this tradition, it is in a fundamentally anti-republican sense. He values "independence," but this is not the virtuous independence of the active citizen; it is the independence of the individual who keeps internal distance from political life.

Montaigne fought for the Catholic side in the French Civil Wars, and asserted that he was a believing Catholic. But there is nothing of traditional Catholic politics in his writings. And his writings do not read like Christian humanism either; he rarely draws on the Bible for political theory. In fact, even his religion is drawn out of skepticism, through fideism. If you cannot know, you should trust in the authority of the customs and traditions of your country; this is the justification for his Christianity. Yet there is very little that is specifically Christian about Montaigne's politics.

In the following sections, we shall turn to the elements of Montaigne's political vision, organized under the rubrics of important skeptical strategies. We shall see that these categories and vocabularies provided Montaigne with a wide range of political values and tools of political analysis, taking the place of alternative languages such as Roman jurisprudence, constitutionalism, absolutism, civic humanism, traditional Catholicism, and Christian humanism.

## 1. *Placing Montaigne in the Hellenistic traditions*

It is, of course, not original to find avatars of ancient skepticism in Montaigne's work. The influential view of Strowski and Villey was that Montaigne went through phases, from Stoic (ca. 1572-1574) to skeptic (*crise pyrrhonienne* ca. 1576) to Epicurean (1578-1592).[4] But Montaigne never tells us of such a series of stages; it runs against his independence and unsystematic spirit, and it obscures the skepticism that permeates his work early and late. It is too easily taken to imply that Montaigne's original Stoicism was somehow unskeptical and that his middle-period skepticism was superseded by an Epicurean stance.

Montaigne's long essay, "Apology for Raymond Sebond" (1575-

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[3] In the following chapter, we shall see that some interpreters do find republicanism in Montaigne.

[4] Strowski, *Montaigne*; Villey, *Les sources et l'evolution des essais*.

1580), provides the point of reference for many other treatments of Montaigne's skepticism, which tend to base most or all of their insights on it alone, implying that it contains all of the important skeptical materials. Fortunately, one recent commentator has begun the spadework of drawing attention to skeptical elements throughout the *Essays*, early and late.[5] This chapter contributes to that project, by ranging across the *Essays*. If anything, the "Apology" is treated relatively briefly, and there is something of a weighting in favor of the third book of the *Essays* (1588) and later revisions, to make the point that there is no lack of skepticism even in Montaigne's maturest phase. Following standard usage, the dating of the essays is brought out by the letters (A) = 1580 edition, (B) = 1588 edition, and (C) = post-1588 editions (including the Bordeaux Copy).

Modern scholars often follow the Strowski-Villey treatment, perhaps emphasizing one or more of the stages. Keohane, for example, writes that on the whole Montaigne's political philosophy is "closest to the Epicurean".[6] Skinner writes that it is a "sceptical and quietist form of stoic moral and political thought".[7] This chapter has been written in part to restore the balance in our appreciation of Montaigne's uses of the heritage of Hellenistic philosophy. Turning Skinner's phrase around, it argues that Montaigne's politics may be better characterized as a "form of skeptical moral and political thought." It does not describe Montaigne's politics as a "stoical and quietist form of skeptical thought" because it draws attention to several ways in which Montaigne's thought is specifically anti-Stoical, and it suggests that his politics is not as quietist as it is usually taken to be.

Interpretation of Montaigne as largely a Stoic derives historically from the reactions of many of Montaigne's contemporaries.[8]

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[5] Sayce, *The Essays of Montaigne*, chapter 8.

[6] Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, p. 101. The *locus classicus* for the claim that Montaigne is largely an Epicurean is Armaingaud, "Étude sur Michel de Montaigne" in his edition of the *Oeuvres complètes de Michel de Montaigne*, and the notes to that edition. Armaingaud writes that Montaigne's skepticism was a ruse, intended to dissimulate his dogmatic rationalism (1:129-138).

[7] Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2:276.

[8] Burke, *Montaigne*, p. 67. Later interpretations of Montaigne as a skeptic spawned the development of the modern school of natural law as a response. See Tuck, "The 'Modern' Theory of Natural Law", and Battista, *Alle origini del*

Skinner admits that the role of Stoic ideas in Montaigne's work is sometimes exaggerated, but persists in characterizing such aspects of his writings as his counsel of submission to the powers that be as "stoic moralism."[9] As we shall see, this has just as good a claim to be understood as "skeptical moralism"; as an element of the skeptical rules for living.

Other readers have followed the same pattern in claiming that Montaigne's stripping bare of the pretences of public life is in the "stoic tradition." But if they are careful, they also draw attention to some of the many points at which Montaigne departs from Stoic doctrine.[10] For example, Montaigne inverts the Stoic theory that the wise man is constant within himself in the face of an inconstant world, insisting that it is the self that is in constant flux and in need of a stable political environment. We shall review several other elements of Montaigne's rejection of Stoicism below. It was often Montaigne's skepticism that set him off from the political neo-Stoicism of such contemporaries and followers as Lipsius, Du Vair, and Charron.

In view of the Strowski-Villey division of Montaigne's phases according to the ancient schools, it is also necessary to point out that although the ancient skeptics were primarily concerned with refuting the doctrines of their rivals in the Stoic and Epicurean schools, that does not make the selective adoption of elements from all of these schools impossible for a later thinker. Already in antiquity the skeptics had to borrow arguments from the Stoics and Epicureans even as they attempted to refute them, partly because they had no dogmas of their own and had to use the arguments of their enemies even as they tried to set them up in equipollence. Thus, skepticism can make use of Stoic and Epicurean principles in a way that the latter two schools cannot consistently include skeptical elements. Montaigne was quite conscious of his pre-rogative to recombine ideas and strategies from these schools regardless of the logical or historical legitimacy of putting them together. Thus, to say that his politics is strongly coloured by

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*pensiero politico libertino: Montaigne e Charron*, chap. 9.

[9] Skinner, *Foundations*, 2:276, 281.

[10] See Burke, *Montaigne*, pp. 55-7; Boon, "Emendations des emprunts dans le texte des essais dit 'stoïciens' de Montaigne", pp. 151, 155; Friedrich, *Montaigne*, pp. 161ff.

skepticism is not to say that it does not also contain elements of the other philosophies.

Some general reminders about the tradition of skepticism as we have explored it in the foregoing chapters should serve to introduce this reading of Montaigne. First, it should be remembered that the ancient skeptics referred to skepticism as an ability, or mental attitude; as a temperament, or matter of personality. It is not a systematic body of propositions. It is specifically not a dogma or doctrinal rule which depends on "assent to a non-evident proposition," as in competing philosophies. Pyrrho is credited with teaching by example; and the subject of his teaching was more a "way of life" than anything else, a way of approaching the world. One implication is that it pervades everything about the skeptic's life. Thus, this chapter is not a partial commentary on Montaigne's work, but purports to see it whole. Its interpretation is powerfully reinforced by the work of a modern commentator, who writes that Montaigne's all-encompassing skepticism was the "principle of the equilibrium of his spirit".[11] His skepticism cannot be set aside in treating his politics or any other aspect of his life; it cannot be just one chapter in a book on Montaigne.

Another implication is that if it is truly lived, skepticism means that there will never be an unqualified assertion in a skeptic's work. Over and over, as we have seen, when Sextus reports on the sayings of the skeptics, he adds something like: "But we make all these statements undogmatically."[12] All of the doubting formulae that the skeptics use apply self-referentially, cancelling themselves. And this

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[11] Gierczynski, "Le Scepticisme de Montaigne, principe de l'équilibre de l'esprit"; see also "La Science de l'ignorance de Montaigne"; "Le 'Que sais-je?' de Montaigne: Interprétation de l'Apologie de Raimond Sebond". Regrettably, Gierczynski goes too far in the direction of reading Montaigne as a dogmatic skeptic when he rephrases his subtitle to the effect that skepticism was the "principle of the stability and firmness of his *reason* [emphasis supplied]" and writes that according to Montaigne, "reason... arrives necessarily at the skeptical doctrine" ("Le Scepticisme" , pp. 127, 130; cf. "La Science", pp. 19, 36, 62f., 72; cf. "Le 'Que sais-je?'"). Gierczynski evidently does not appreciate the self-referential character of Montaigne's skepticism. He also downplays the role of the skeptical tradition by claiming that Montaigne developed his ideas without the aid of anyone, and that they were the "pure productions of his natural reason" ("Le Scepticisme", p. 130).

[12] PH I 24 (Bury, 1:17).

holds for Montaigne. Almost everything that he asserts at one point
he takes back at another. Even the preference for tranquillity, the
general approval of the skeptics' rules of living, and the other
elements of skepticism discussed below are subjected to doubts.
This is what makes Montaigne so hard to grasp hold of, and is so
frustrating for those who want him to stand by something that he
says. But skepticism is playful in this way, and the real skeptic
cannot be pinned down to absolutes.

   This does not mean, on the other hand, that Montaigne has no
commitments, no beliefs, no opinions. His skepticism is not amoral.
Certain positions emerge consistently throughout the *Essays*, such
as Montaigne's hatred of cruelty.[13] But he hates cruelty "by nature
and by judgment", not because of certainties (TR 408, F 313). In
skeptical terms, this is an opinion about the way things appear to
him, not an absolute and dogmatic claim to moral knowledge and
truth.[14]

   Montaigne's moralism is complex. Unlike Cicero at his most
naive, Montaigne recognizes that there can be instances in which
politics may require immorality. But unlike a caricature of
Machiavelli, he does not subordinate morality to politics *tout court*.
For a skeptic, there is no "always" and no "never." In very limited
situations, where there is no other choice, he will allow the use of
evil for good purposes. But he will not deny that it is evil, and he
uses his best judgment to restrict it.[15]

   Commitments and opinions that are firm but not absolute are the
province of nature and judgment, as we have just seen. Throughout
the *Essays*, judgment emerges as the deciding factor when appear-
ances are contradictory and in the absence of knowledge. In pre-
vious chapters, we have seen that the ancient skeptics spoke of
*suspending* judgment. Does Montaigne's reliance on judgment sig-

[13] Cf. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices,* and Schwartz, "'La Conscience d'un homme':
Reflections on the Problem of Conscience in the Essais".

[14] As Gierczynski, "Le scepticisme de Montaigne", p. 113, puts it, "the moral
considerations of Montaigne are destitute of all dogmatism". See also the discussion
in Hallie, "The Ethics of Montaigne's 'De la cruauté'".

[15] This paragraph draws heavily on Goumarre, "La morale et la politique:
Montaigne, Cicerón et Machiavel", which should be read in the light of Parkin's
critique in "Montaigne Essais 3.1: The Morality of Commitment". Parkin usefully
contrasts Montaigne's views to those of contemporaries like Bodin and Pasquier.

nify a departure from the ancients on this point? The best answer is probably that we are using 'judgment' in two different senses here. Recall that Pyrrho was said to have suspended judgment about the "reality behind the appearance", and Montaigne certainly had little patience for such metaphysical matters. Pyrrho went on to live in accordance with appearances, and later skeptics even formulated principles for best managing life in accordance with appearances. Thus, skeptics could suspend judgment about philosophical and theological claims, for example, while using their best judgment to decide how to live. As one study of Montaigne's notion of judgment makes clear, "judgment and ignorance... [are] two sides of the same coin" in the *Essays*.[16] Judgment in this sense, as the faculty of making decisions in conditions of uncertainty, is thus a peculiarly appropriate faculty for skeptics.[17] It grounds Montaigne's political opinions, and his politics is well characterized as a politics of good judgment.

Another issue that must be addressed is the distinction among types of skepticism. As we have seen, Sextus distinguished Academic skepticism from Pyrrhonian skepticism on the ground that the "Academics treat [truth] as inapprehensible: the [Pyrrhonian] Sceptics keep on searching."[18] The former, by making a positive assertion, are dogmatists, according to Sextus, and the latter are the real skeptics. But as we have seen above, there is a "dogmatic" reading of all of the skeptics, including Pyrrho, which suggests that they indeed affirm that truth is unobtainable, and a "skeptical" reading which suggests that they believe that even that statement is open to doubt. Neither of these readings is obviously wrong.

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[16] La Charité, *The Concept of Judgment in Montaigne*, p. 21. La Charité points out that Montaigne often contrasts his notion of judgment with reason, which was what the Pyrrhonists suspended judgment about (pp. 40-1). La Charité unnecessarily assumes that Pyrrhonism implies a "deep personal... commitment to its discipline" (p. 40). He also turns Montaigne into a dogmatist of sorts by asserting that Montaigne considered his own judgment "an incorruptible instrument" (p. 73), and that "judgment's knowledge of physical, intellectual, psychological, and moral phenomena is certain and indubitable" (p.106). There is very little evidence for this, and much that counterbalances it. Judgment is best understood as Montaigne's recourse in the absence of certainty.

[17] See Brush, *Montaigne and Bayle: Variations on the Theme of Skepticism*, p. 128.

[18] PH I 3-4 (Bury, 1:3).

Montaigne quotes Sextus on the two kinds of skepticism (TR 482, F 371), but he does not consistently maintain the distinction (as did few of his contemporaries).[19] Therefore, when one recent commentator writes of Montaigne's repudiation of Pyrrhonism in favour of Socrates's Academic skepticism and another tries to persuade us that he evolved from Pyrrhonism to Cicero's probabilism to Socratic skepticism, one is tempted to subject their findings to the acid tests of skepticism.[20] But for present purposes, this distinction is not likely to have much of a differential effect on Montaigne's politics. Most of what we will see below will be unaffected whether Montaigne is more of a Pyrrhonian than an Academic or vice-versa, if indeed that distinction can be maintained.

One thing seems fairly clear, and that is that Montaigne is best interpreted as a thoroughly skeptical, self-referential skeptic. As we have already seen, somewhere in the *Essays* even his own most consistent positions are contradicted, questioned, or doubted. He opposes dishonesty and cruelty, but can recognize their value in rare cases. He dwells at length on human fallibility, but occasionally praises human resourcefulness and even knowledge. Rather than sheer inconsistency, this can be seen as a skeptic's self-referential skepticism.

One last issue that will serve to introduce the discussion below is the larger implications of a belief in human fallibility and skepticism. For most skeptics, and for Montaigne, an acceptance of man's weaknesses did not imply misanthropy or any strong sense of pity. In fact, there is almost a sense of revelling in the challenge and heroism of living with fallibility. Over and over, Montaigne displays pride in living life conforming to his natural condition. He speaks of Pyrrho "(A) enjoying all natural pleasures and comforts" (TR 485, F 374). The saving grace of the skeptical Socrates is that he is "a man," with all of the weaknesses that implies. "(B) I love a gay and sociable wisdom, and shun harshness and austerity in be-

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[19] See Limbrick, "Was Montaigne Really a Pyrrhonian?", pp. 67, 73.

[20] Kellerman, "The Essais and Socrates", p. 210; Limbrick, "Was Montaigne Really a Pyrrhonian?". Similarly, there is very little justification for Gierczynski's view that Montaigne was a dogmatic skeptic, such that our incertitude is a certitude ("Le scepticisme de Montaigne", pp. 119, 129), which amounts to the claim that he was an Academic, in Sextus's terms. For another attempt to classify Montaigne's skepticism, see Gray, "Montaigne's Pyrrhonism", 119-136.

havior", Montaigne writes, and Socrates was always "(C) serene and smiling" (TR 822, F 641; cf. TR 334, F 254). Montaigne glories in human fallibility; it does not weigh his spirit down.[21]

## 2. Ataraxia, *or the search for tranquillity*

In previous chapters we have seen that *ataraxia*, or mental tranquillity, was reported to be the goal of the activities of the founder of Pyrrhonism, Pyrrho of Elis, and that later skeptics elaborated on this goal. As Sextus explains it, skeptical inquiry is undertaken to remove the "disturbances" that conflicting opinions about the nature of things create.[22] When skeptics suspend judgment because of their inability to decide, they discover that they are in a state of quietude. The resulting tranquillity is the skeptics' refuge when faced with human fallibility.

Tranquillity was also one of Montaigne's chief goals. He did not claim to follow slavishly any specifically skeptical notions of tranquillity, but the resonances are obvious. He observed that "(B) philosophers and rustics, concur in tranquillity and happiness" (TR 998, F 780). Lacking the virtue of the former and the insensibility of the latter, he trained himself to achieve the same "(B) by disposition" (TR 997, F 780). Thus he cultivated a tranquil soul: as he put it, "(B) I try to keep my soul and thoughts in repose" (TR 998, F 781); "(B) if my soul is not jolly, it is at least tranquil and at rest" (TR 1077, F 842). His nemeses were "(B) agitation and struggle," "trouble and conflict" (TR 1068, F 836).

Tranquillity had important political consequences. It was a standard: his criticism of the conflict of interpretations in law was the rhetorical question, "(B) Do we see any progress and advance toward tranquillity?" (TR 1044, F 817). It was his defense of his activities as mayor of Bordeaux: people should be grateful to him for "(B) the order, the gentle and mute tranquillity, that accompanied my administration" (TR 1002, F 783). If this meant that he did not do enough, it also kept him from causing harm: "(B) they accuse me of inactivity in a time when almost everyone was convicted of doing too much" (TR 999, F 781). Montaigne is, of

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[21] Cf. Gierczynski, "Le Scepticisme", p. 122.
[22] PH I 12, 26-7 (Bury, 1:9, 19).

course, referring to the excesses and cruelties of the Civil Wars.[23]

Tranquillity was also a goal for ancient philosophers of other schools, including the Cyrenaics and Epicureans, but they sought it through knowledge: as Diogenes Laertius put it, the Epicurean wise man "will hold firm doctrines and not be aporetic".[24] Montaigne made it clear he was not looking for tranquillity in the doctrines of any school. It is a personal vision: he emphasized that by tranquil he means "(C) not according to Metrodorus or Arcesilaus or Aristippus, but according to me. Since philosophy has not been able to discover a way to tranquillity that is suitable to all, let everyone seek it individually" (TR 605-6, F 471). In (C) revisions his nemeses are still "care and trouble"; "I seek only to grow indifferent and relaxed" (TR 931, F 728).

The activities of politics are subordinated to the goal of the individual's tranquillity. Thus, although it embarrasses him ("[C] I doubt if I can decently admit it"), Montaigne says that he has managed to maintain "repose and tranquillity" amid the "ruin of my country" in the Civil Wars (TR 1023, F 800).[25] Fame and conquest are not his goals: "(C) All the glory that I aspire to in my life is to have lived it tranquilly" (TR 605, F 471). But this is justified by the larger purpose of man: "(B) To compose our characters is our duty, not to compose books, and to win, not battles and provinces, but order and tranquillity in our conduct... All other things, ruling, hoarding, building, are only little appendages and props, at most" (TR 1088, F 850-1).

Occasional misleading expressions to the contrary, however, *ataraxia* is not a matter of achieving some kind of numbness or sheer inactivity. Montaigne was well aware of portrayals of Pyrrho

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[23] The best contextualizations of Montaigne's writings in the history of his times are Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps: Les événements et les Essais*; and *Les Essais de Montaigne: Miroir et procès de leur temps*. See also Heinrich Mann's historical novel, *Die Jugend des Königs Henri Quatre*.

[24] DL X 120 (Long and Sedley, 1:133).

[25] The neo-Stoic Du Vair would have sacrificed his repose for the good of the state, and Montaigne's erstwhile follower Charron suggested retirement in civil wars, but Montaigne chose a middle way. For Du Vair, see *De la constance et consolation ès calamités publiques*. For Charron, *Of Wisdom*, bk. 3, chap. 4, sec. 12. See Baron, "Secularization of Wisdom and Political Humanism in the Renaissance".

as "(A) stupid and immobile", but he claimed that Pyrrho "did not want to make himself a stump or a stone; he wanted to make himself a living, talking, reasoning man" (TR 485, F 374). The ancient skeptics had insisted that skepticism was a matter of ongoing inquiry; as we have seen, in Greek "skeptic" meant "inquirer." A recent commentator is right when he observes that Montaigne is best characterized as "the practical skeptic, who wants to investigate everything for himself".[26] When Montaigne says that our duty is to compose our characters, he is using "compose" as an active verb.

*Ataraxia* is also not a matter of disarmed paralysis brought about by recognition of our weaknesses. Montaigne is not "the metaphysical sceptic, who doubts the evidence of his own senses,"[27] at least not for practical purposes (and neither, by their own account, were the ancient skeptics). Montaigne insists that he seeks a "(B) pleasant and cheerful tranquillity" not a "somber and stupid" one (TR 821, F 640). *Ataraxia* is, paradoxically enough, a robust tranquillity, which does not cut the skeptic off from action.

## 3. *Montaigne's skeptical methodology*

In the pursuit of *ataraxia*, the ancient skeptics used a range of methods which reappear in Montaigne's work. As we have seen in the foregoing chapters, Sextus Empiricus reported that *ataraxia* emerges as if by chance from a confession of ignorance and suspension of judgment. Suspension of judgment, in turn, is brought about by the marshalling of equally weighty (equipollent) arguments on both sides of philosophical questions. Sextus credits Aenesidemus with systematizing a set of tropes, or arguments tending to undermine any dogmatic claims. One of the most important of these for political purposes draws attention to the variety of customs and laws found in the world, undermining any claim that particular customs or laws are privileged because of their relation to truth. Another whole set of tropes attacks the theory of causation, thus undercutting the pretensions of any "science" of politics, ancient or modern. Finally, Sextus claimed that the skeptical methodology as a whole was a matter of ongoing inquiry, and drew attention to the importance of a non-dogmatic vocabulary for the

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[26] Burke, *Montaigne*, p. 48.
[27] *Ibid.*

purposes of such inquiry.[28] Montaigne borrowed from and elaborated on all of these methods.

## A. *Confession of ignorance and suspension of judgment*

Montaigne's Socrates offers a good introduction to his position on the confession of ignorance of the skeptics. There is no question that Montaigne admired Socrates highly; in the last essays Socrates emerges as the hero. But it is very much Montaigne's Socrates, not the historical Socrates in all his various incarnations. Socrates's daemon, his divine mission, his rationalism, and his doctrine that virtue is knowledge are ignored or specifically rejected.[29] It is the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues, Socrates the skeptic, whom Montaigne recreates: "(C) his best doctrine was the doctrine of ignorance" (TR 478, F 368).[30]

Montaigne had shown a predilection for this doctrine long before the *Essays* were published. In 1570 he wrote in one of the dedicatory letters to La Boétie's works that "For my part I prefer to be more at ease and less able, more happy and less understanding" (TR 1361, F 1057). Also outside of the *Essays*, many of the sentences inscribed on the ceiling of Montaigne's study carried on the theme of man's ignorance as an element of his fallibility. In Greek was "Not knowing anything is the sweetest life"; in Latin, "our mind wanders in darkness, and being blind, cannot discern the truth"; and these are only two of over a dozen Greek and Latin phrases that express the sentiment (TR 1419-25).

It was, of course, in the "Apology" that Montaigne played on the theme of the need for a confession of ignorance and suspension of judgement the most, sometimes paraphrasing directly from the ancient skeptics. This essay has long been recognized as a demolition of Stoic humanism. Recognizing that true Pyrrhonism requires a "(A) new language", Montaigne reports that it is "(B) more firmly grasped in the form of interrogation: 'What do I know?' --the words I bear as a motto inscribed over a pair of scales" (TR 508, F 517). Thus, "(C) in Socrates' opinion, and in mine, too, the wisest way

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[28] For the materials in this paragraph, see Sextus, *Outlines*, book 1.

[29] See Kellerman, "Montaigne's Socrates", pp. 171-73.

[30] Gierczynski, "La Science", p. 84, asserts that Montaigne considered Socrates "as much his teacher as Pyrrho".

to judge heaven is not to judge it at all" (TR 517, F 400); "(A) it is no good to be so subtle and clever" (TR 540, F 419); these are surely Montaigne's own feelings. Much more could be taken from the "Apology," but perhaps it is more important to show that Montaigne did not abandon this skeptical strategy in later additions to the *Essays*, as will be clear from the following discussion.

In post-1588 (C) revisions, Montaigne added the bold and inclusive "all the abuses in the world" to his claim in "Of Cripples" that many abuses "are engendered, by our being taught to be afraid of professing ignorance". But anyone "who wants to be cured of ignorance must confess it", he writes (TR 1007, F 788). The implication is not that ignorance can be eliminated, but that we are cured by recognizing that we have to learn to live with it.

This confession requires a certain heroism, Montaigne writes: "(B) There is a certain strong and generous ignorance that concedes nothing to knowledge in honour and courage." It is even, para-doxically, itself a form of knowledge, Montaigne adds in (C): "an ignorance that requires no less knowledge to conceive it than does knowledge". It is a philosophical ignorance, with resonances to the skeptical tradition: "(C) Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy, inquiry its progress, and ignorance its end" (TR 1008, F 788).

There are practical political implications of this discussion. Montaigne recalls reading about a trial in which the circumstances made the judge's decision seem rash, and yet a man was condemned to be hanged. In another example, some "(B) poor devils" who pretended to work miracles "are at this moment in prison and will shortly pay the penalty for the common folly". In this case, Montaigne admits, it may be clear that there were no miracles, but "in many things of similar quality, surpassing our knowledge, it is my opinion that we should suspend our judgment, just as much in the direction of rejecting as of accepting" (TR 1007-8, F 788). One important practical danger of failing to recognize ignorance is needless cruelty.

Sometimes, we would be better off without knowing the truth, even if we could: "(C) Truth has its inconveniences, disadvantages, and incompatibilities with us", Montaigne writes (TR 983, F 769). A confession of ignorance and suspension of judgment (especially about abstract philosophical questions) may contribute to the convenience, advantage, and compatibility of our lives. "Oh, what a sweet and soft and healthy pillow is ignorance and incuriosity!"

Montaigne exclaims (TR 1050-1, F822). This line of thought distances him from the confidence in the beneficial effects of knowledge of neo-Stoics like Lipsius, and even from purported followers like Charron.[31]

## B. *Equipollence and the variety of customs*

Cicero wrote that the skeptics argued every issue *in utramque partem* ["on both sides"] and Sextus reported that the basic method of skepticism was "that of opposing to every proposition an equal proposition".[32] In the *Essays* this method is endemic: one recent commentator observes that Montaigne will "in the course of any one essay contradict whatever statement he had seemed to support".[33] This has puzzled countless readers who have resented Montaigne's inconsistency or his laziness. It was not, however, either of these, but rather the traditional method of skeptical inquiry. Equal arguments on both sides of any issue disarm the passions of inquirers, and dispose them toward the *ataraxia* that the skeptics seek.

One of the most widely used of the skeptical modes described by Sextus performs a closely related function. The tenth mode of Aenesidemus, as he described it, juxtaposes opposite habits, laws, and customary beliefs of one people and one epoch against those of another, with important political implications. In much the same way as the marshalling of equipollent propositions undercuts dogmatic arguments, this mode undermines any suggestions that one set of such habits or laws is essentially or absolutely better than another.

Montaigne employs this method with devastating effect on a wide variety of beliefs and customs. For examples, "A custom of the island of Cea" contrasts cases of the acceptance of suicide with prohibitions; the result is neither to justify it nor to condemn it across the board. Montaigne's repeated criticisms of medicine draw power from his juxtaposition of the conflicting opinions of phys-

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[31] On Lipsius's optimism, see Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State*, especially pp. 61, 67. Charron wrote favorably of knowledge as the "first rule of all prudence" in *Wisdome*, e.g., p. 354.

[32] Cicero, *Academica*, I.46 (Rackham, p. 455); Sextus, PH I 12 (Bury, 1:9).

[33] Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance*, p. 146.

icians.[34] And as for politics: "(B) All public actions are subject to uncertain and diverse interpretations" (TR 998, F 781); "(A) Notably in political matters there is a fine field open for vacillation and dispute" (TR 638, F 497), Montaigne writes, because judgments are made on the basis of experience and experience is so diverse. The implication is that no one has a monopoly on the correct judgment of those actions.

The experience of the Civil War brought a new twist on the ubiquity of arguments *in utramque partem*. As Montaigne reports, the parties in the war actually reversed their positions as their fortunes changed: "(C) This proposition, so solemn, whether it is lawful for a subject to rebel and take arms against his prince in defense of religion--remember in whose mouths, this year just past, the affirmative of this was the buttress of one party, the negative was the buttress of what other party; and hear now from what quarter comes the voice" (TR420, F 323). Such craven opportunism was an additional reason for suspending judgment as to which opinion was right in any deep sense.

Many commentators have suggested that Montaigne's experience in the study of law and in the courts was one source of his skepticism. It is certainly easy to see how the law could reinforce any natural bent toward skepticism; and there was a literary precedent for the skeptical treatment of law in Montaigne's time in the *Dialogues* of Guy de Brués (1557).

As we have seen above, the contradictions of Bartolus and Baldus on the Roman law disgusted Montaigne. Already in the (A) materials, he suggests that it is only for lack of wit that a judge cannot decide for whichever side of a case he favours (TR 566, F 439). But it is in book three that he devotes several pages to a wideranging critique of the law. The problem, he says, is in the number of laws and interpretations thereof. Multiplying laws in order to bridle judges will not work because there is always room for inter-

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[34] Since ancient times, medical analogies have often been used to legitimate political arrangements, so Montaigne's criticisms of medicine can be taken as an oblique critique of politics as well. For a detailed and original review of Montaigne on medicine, see Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement*, chap. 4. Schaefer, *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne*, p. 131 note, suggests that Montaigne's critique of physicians is intended to be read as a critique of "the physicians of the soul", i.e., theologians.

pretation. "(B) Never did two men judge alike about the same thing, and it is impossible to find two opinions exactly alike, not only in different men, but in the same man at different times", he reports. The result is that men have no access to objective justice: "so many interpretations disperse the truth and shatter it." Glosses on laws and glosses on glosses just "increase doubts and ignorance". "Do we therefore find any end to the need of interpreting?", Montaigne asks. Men should quit pretending that they can find some kind of truth in the law, and recognize the "natural infirmity of their mind" (TR 1044, F 817).

The consequences of the "(C) dogmatic and decisive speaking" of legal sentences are grim (TR 490, F 377). "(B) How many innocent people have we found to have been punished...?", Montaigne asks rhetorically. "(C) How many condemnations have I seen more criminal than the crime?", he adds in a later edition (TR 1047-8, F 819-20). Some of these condemnations have been carried out only in the name of formalism and upholding the dignity of the system; and in those cases the victims are sacrificed to a chimera, because no laws represent true justice in all cases.

In respect to justice, the chief function of Montaigne's juxtaposition of contrary customs and laws is its demolition of Stoic theories of universal natural law. As one commentator observes, Montaigne recognizes "in universal consensus the only proof of the determination of laws of nature".[35] As he reports in his discussion of law, it is countries such as China that have taught him "(C) how much ampler and more varied the world is than either the ancients or we ourselves understand" (TR 1049, F 820). If no such consensus on customs and laws can be found, then we cannot identify any natural laws of justice.

The Epicureans recognized that justice is conventional, and argued that it rested on utility. This provided them with a critical standard: it meant that "if someone makes a law and it does not happen to acccord with the utility of social relationships, it no longer has the nature of justice".[36] But Montaigne took this kind of argument for dogmatism, and he never claimed to follow laws because they were useful or just. His skeptical conclusion is not that the law must be

[35] Battista, *Alle origini*, p. 171.
[36] Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1:125.

reformed; it is simply that "(B) there is no remedy" (TR 1048, F 820). Man is not able to so much as identify truly just laws, much less carry them out. Montaigne's personal position, then, is to avoid the courts as much as possible. His advice to lawmakers is to minimize the number of laws and make them simple and clear, and his advice to judges is to do their work with humility and avoid unnecessary cruelty.[37] We shall see below that he advocated following the laws and customs of one's country, but as we can see here, that was not because they had any claim to truth or justice.

## C. *The illusions of causation*

We have seen that Sextus reported on a series of eight tropes used by Aenesidemus to undermine Stoic theories of causation. The first one anticipated Hume with the observation that causal explanations "deal with things nonevident". The remaining modes criticized philosophers for assigning causes without justification; for believing without proof that perceived causal relations have anything to do with reality; for failing to agree on causes; for inconsistency; and for basing "their doctrine about things equally doubtful upon things equally doubtful".[38] We have seen how these modes can be read as a skeptical methodology for the study of politics, undermining dogmatic claims to understand political causes and effects. Montaigne uses similar methods with a vengeance: "(B) vain is the undertaking of he who presumes to embrace both causes and consequences", he writes, and the relevance to political matters is explicit: "vain, especially in the deliberations of war" (TR 912, F 713).

The very first essay in the *Essays* is titled "By diverse means we arrive at the same end", and this expresses a repeated theme in Montaigne's work. He starts from the proposition that the most common way of winning the mercy of conquerors and judges is by submission. But that does not always work, and Montaigne gives us examples of great leaders and of "less lofty souls" from the ancient world to early modern Europe who reserved their mercy for steadfastness and bravery. Can this be taken as a lesson, then, for those

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[37] Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps*, pp. 164-8, finds a broad reform program in these suggestions and in the Remonstrances. Nevertheless, Montaigne advances these suggestions only as the product of his judgment, not as truths.

[38] PH I 180-85 (Bury, 1:103-5).

who are faced with defeat or judgment? No, because for every ex-
ample there is a counter-example, where valour earned the brave
ones nothing.

Two examples of Alexander's fury at the pride of defeated en-
emies move Montaigne to reflect on peculiar reasons why he might
not show mercy to the brave. Was he so used to courage that he
respected it less? Was he envious? Was he just impetuous? The
larger question would be, must one engage in such an analysis of
every conqueror or judge before deciding whether to throw oneself
on his mercy or keep up a brave front? Montaigne's questions about
Alexander are not answered. And, of course, from all that we have
seen about human fallibility, Montaigne discredits any belief that we
can carry out such an analysis of deep and consistent causes. "(A)
Truly man is a marvelously vain, diverse, and undulating object. It
is hard to found any constant and uniform judgment on him" (TR
13, F 5). The next time, perhaps, Alexander would relent.

Later in the same volume, another essay is titled "Various out-
comes of the same plan". Here, Augustus shows clemency to a con-
spirator against his life, and no more conspiracies trouble him
again. But the duke of Guise tries the same thing in Montaigne's
time, and a few months later he is assassinated. "(A) So vain and
frivolous a thing is human prudence; and athwart all our plans,
counsels, and precautions, Fortune still maintains her grasp on the
results" (TR 125, F 92).

In this essay, as in the previous one, Montaigne does not simply
throw up his hands in despair. He inquires: why does a man who
throws himself on the mercy of a mob sometimes get killed? In one
case he observed, it was because the man panicked and showed
fear. But, of course, that might have saved another man on another
day. Most of Montaigne's advice, accordingly, turns on living with
uncertainty. If you know that you might be killed either way you
handle conspiracies, you might as well stop worrying excessively
about them and get used to the idea, rather than living in constant
fear. And you might as well live with dignity: "(A) when the var-
ious details and circumstances of a matter have so perplexed us that
we are powerless to see and choose what is the most advantageous,"
it is preferable to "cast ourselves into the course in which there is
the most decency and justice" (TR 127, F 93). And finally, if we
are prepared for the worst, we can "derive some consolation from

the fact that we are not sure that it will happen" (TR 132, F 97).[39]

In one of the last essays, Montaigne returns to the theme. In "Of Cripples," he stresses: "(B) how free and vague an instrument human reason is". "So much uncertainty there is in all things; so gross, (C) obscure, and obtuse is our perception!" And the question of causation is specifically addressed: "(C) The knowledge of causes belongs only to Him who has the guidance of things, not to us who only have the enduring of them" (TR 1003, F 784-5).

The whole thrust of these essays, accordingly, is to undermine any claims to human prudence in politics in any but the weakest sense. As one scholar puts it, politics is "too complex, he is sure, for [its] workings ever really to be understood by... political science".[40] There is none of Charron's confidence in "politicke prudence" (to use a contemporary translation), and there is no claim to draw from the classics a Lipsian "science of politics".[41] Without the vocabulary to express what we now know as "sensitive dependence on initial conditions",[42] Montaigne is following the ancient skeptics in subverting confidence in the causal analyses of any would-be political "science".

## D. *Rhetoric of inquiry: form and vocabulary*

Montaigne is usually credited with inventing the essay. The term meant literally a "trial" or "test," and fits nicely into the skeptical mentality because such an experiment is by nature tentative, subject to further testing. Montaigne's actual practice of writing essays and then adding to them layer by layer for subsequent editions powerfully reinforces the implication that they are not finished products, but temporary reports on an ongoing inquiry. Montaigne claims no timeless certainties in the essays; only that what he writes is what is on his mind right now.

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[39] Schaefer, *Montaigne's Political Philosophy*, pp. 251ff., argues that a careful reading suggests that Montaigne subtly shows that by diverse means we do *not* arrive at the same end, that the various outcomes are *not* based on the same plan, and that Montaigne is in fact offering us dogmatic advice in these essays. See the next chapter for some remarks on Schaefer's methodology for arriving at this conclusion.

[40] Clark, "Montaigne and the Imagery of Political Discourse", p. 350.

[41] Charron, *Wisdome*, pp. 353ff.; Oestreich, *Neostoicism*, p. 39.

[42] See Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science*, esp. chap. 1.

One implication of the essay form is that it does not pretend to teach lessons or a dogma. In his post-1588 revisions, Montaigne will propose only that "what is useful to me may also by accident be useful to others" (TR 357, F 272). He harbours a healthy skepticism of his ability to persuade, since his plausible reasoning does not even persuade himself: "(B) if it could persuade as well as it preaches, it would serve me very well" (TR 1068, F 836). The many examples he produces are but a "(B) hazy mirror, reflecting all things in all ways" (TR 1067, F 834).

An influential study claims that Montaigne's progress was toward a "discovery of man".[43] An equally helpful characterization would begin from the observation that Montaigne apparently discovered that man--in the universal and in himself--was a work in progress. "(C) Myself now and myself soon after are indeed two", he wrote. And yet he could write in the previous paragraph that "my book is always one" (TR 941, F 736). On the one hand, the book can be seen as a kind of anchor for this changing man; on the other, since the book grew and evolved over the years, we see that Montaigne is willing to recognize identity even in changing objects. His focus in the essays gravitated more and more toward the process of change. Thus his progress can also be described as Montaigne's discovery of process. In his case, the process was that of ongoing inquiry, the ancient definition of skepticism.

Montaigne's essays are written in a low style, which is perfect for "juxtaposing ideas and deliberately suspending judgement".[44] A higher style probably would have been incompatible with skepticism, implying more certainty and committing Montaigne to a more dogmatic position.

Sextus had written of the importance of the skeptic's vocabulary, consisting of phrases like "I know nothing", "I take no stand", "perhaps", and so forth.[45] Montaigne writes: "(B) We talk about everything didactically. The style in Rome was that even what a witness deposed to having seen with his own eyes, and what a judge decided with his most certain knowledge, was drawn up in this form of speech: 'It seems to me.' It makes me hate probable things when

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[43] Frame, *Montaigne's Discovery of Man: The Humanization of a Humanist.*
[44] Burke, *Montaigne*, p. 60.
[45] PH I 187ff. (Bury, 1:107ff.).

they are planted on me as infallible. I like these words, which
soften and moderate the rashness of our propositions: 'perhaps', 'to
some extent', 'some', 'they say', 'I think', and the like. And if I
had had to train children, I would have filled their mouths so much
with this way of answering, inquiring, not decisive--'What does that
mean? I do not understand it. That might be. Is it true?'--that they
would be more likely to have kept the manner of learners at sixty
than to represent learned doctors at ten, as they do" (TR 1007, F
788).

All of these elements belong in what has been aptly characterized
as Montaigne's "rhetoric of skepticism".[46] It is a rhetoric of
ongoing inquiry, of ambivalence and ambiguity. As such, it is in
stark contract to rhetorics of assertion, truth, and clarity.
Montaigne's skepticism was at the heart of his answer to Luther's
rhetoric of Christian truth. As he sums it up, "(B) I speak as an
ignorant inquirer... I do not teach, I tell stories" (TR 784, F 612).

We shall now turn to Montaigne's reflections on the ancient form-
ulation of how the skeptic lives.

### 4. *The Pyrrhonian rules for living*

As we have seen, Sextus Empiricus wrote that there were four
"normal rules of life" that skeptics follow; although "undogmat-
ically": "one part of it lies in the guidance of nature, another in the
constraint of the passions, another in the tradition of laws and
customs, another in the instruction of the arts".[47] In his essay on
Sebond, Montaigne paraphrased these rules. Pyrrhonians "(A) lend
and accommodate themselves to natural inclinations, to the im-
pulsion and restraint of the passions, to the constitution of laws and
customs, and to the tradition of the arts". He affirms the value of
this advice with a declaration that "(A) there is nothing in man's
invention that has so much verisimilitude and usefulness" as
Pyrrhonism (TR 485-6, F 374-5). Much of the rest of Montaigne's
book, and much of his politics, is an elaboration of these rules.

We shall begin our discussion with the third of these rules,
requiring accommodation to prevailing laws and customs. This has
the most obvious political implications, and it has led most

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[46] Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism*, chap. 5.
[47] PH I 23-4 (Bury 1:17).

commentators to conclude that skeptics, including Montaigne, are
virtually necessarily conservative. We shall then turn to the
implications of the remaining rules for politics.

## A. *The "constitution of laws and customs"*

Our treatment of Montaigne's view of law and customs will begin
with an exploration of his understanding of the relation between the
public and private realms and proceed to a discussion of his advice
and example.

### i. *The symbiosis of public and private*

Many commentators have drawn attention to Montaigne's inversion
of the traditional civic evaluation of the public and private realms.
An implication of the priority that we have seen above of personal
order and tranquillity over building and ruling is a priority of the
private over the public. Montaigne's book itself, he warns the
reader, was written with no goal but a "domestic and private" one
(TR 9, F 2). He celebrated his private friendship with Etienne de
La Boétie as the best thing he had ever done. But the priority of the
private is never complete, and public and private co-exist in what
is best described as a symbiosis. It emerges that Montaigne has
skeptical reasons for this evaluation.

In writing about himself, Montaigne observes, "(B) I do not
portray being: I portray passage" (TR 782, F 611). His reason, his
taste, his passions, his judgment, his values are ever-changing and
chaotic. He is always trying to create order and regularity in his
life.[48] Accordingly, what he needs in the public realm is something
to hold onto, to provide stability. Thus, he is willing to submit to
the laws and customs wherever he is, as a sort of anchor. And he
is willing to limit his own reason in this interest: "(C) private
reason has only a private jurisdiction" (TR 120, F 88). This has led
scholars to emphasize Montaigne's splitting of the notion of
"subject" into individual subject and political subject, and the
capacity for doubleness that is constantly brought out in his
treatment of public and private realms.[49]

Montaigne was not original in splitting public from private; this

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[48] E.g., TR 316-7, 321, 586, 639-42, 1082; F 240-1, 244, 455, 498-501, 846.
[49] E.g., Reiss, "Montaigne and the Subject of Polity".

had Stoic roots. But the Stoics thought that their private self could be stable, and it was the public realm that was unstable. Montaigne reversed this relationship. "Myself now and myself soon after are indeed two," as we have seen. Montaigne needed a relatively stable public realm in order to anchor his unpredictable private self.

Nor was Montaigne original in putting the private above the public for some purposes, although this was repudiation of the traditional civic republican ethos. Surely a very important precedent for Montaigne was his friend La Boétie's juxtaposition of private republicanism with public obedience in "Voluntary Servitude". As long as the private was more important than the public, Montaigne could maintain (against the ancient Stoics and Epicureans) that friendship itself, so important to him, was a private guide, and explicitly not a public one.

Among other political practices, this theory justified Montaigne's belief that the best religion was the old religion. The "(A) ancient beliefs of our religion" provide predictability; "otherwise I could not keep myself from rolling about incessantly" (TR 553, F 428). Custom provides "public strength" where individuals are weak and fallible.[50] A corollary here is that religion is a public matter, not a matter of private conscience or reason.

The emphasis on toeing the public line was never absolute, however. The best morality remained private in important respects. Montaigne's essay "Of the useful [public] and the honest [private]" maintains a balance between the two.[51] The public sphere should never have possession of the whole man, he writes in another essay: "(B) The mayor and Montaigne have always been two" (TR 989, F 774). His loyalty to church and state is only outward: "(A) public society has nothing to do with our thoughts," he writes (TR 117, F 86). This position makes room for the conclusion that "(C) there are some things illicit even against the enemy; (B) that the common interest must not require all things of all men against the private interest... and that not all things are permissible for an honourable man in the service (C) of his king, or (B) of the common cause, or of the laws" (TR 780, F 609). Finally, if the laws of his country "(B) threatened even the tip of my finger, I should instantly go and

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[50] Keohane, *Philosophy and the State*, p. 114.
[51] See Friedrich, *Montaigne*, pp. 173ff.

find others, wherever it may be" (TR 1049, F 821). These are certainly significant limits to Montaigne's alleged quietism.

## ii. *Law and custom*

Now we arrive at Montaigne's use of Sextus's claim that skeptics follow the customs and laws of their society. In the earliest essays, there are suggestions of a rather negative attitude toward custom. He writes of "(A) barriers of custom" and that he cannot believe "(A) that the effects of reason cannot match the effects of habit" (TR 221, 238; F 166, 179). Habit "(A) stupefies our senses" and "puts our judgment to sleep" (TR 107, 110; F 78, 80). Much of the early essay "Of Custom" consists of a skeptical juxtaposition of the variety of customs that have existed throughout the world, undermining any claim that particular customs are grounded in reason or nature. But already in the first edition Montaigne asserts that the man of understanding "(A) should follow the accepted fashions and forms" (TR 117, F 86). In later editions, he added several quotes to this chapter from ancient authors such as Cicero and Pliny to the same effect, and the sentiment surfaces frequently in other chapters.[52]

As for laws, already in the first edition Montaigne asserts that it is "(A) the rule of rules, and the universal law of laws, that each man should observe those of the place he is in". A metaphor provides the reason: "a government is like a structure of different parts joined together in such a relation that it is impossible to budge one without the whole body feeling it"; therefore, "it is very doubtful whether there can be such evident profit in changing an accepted law... as there is harm in disturbing it". In 1588 he adds that "(B) it takes a lot of self-love and presumption to have such esteem for one's own opinions that to establish them one must overthrow the public peace" (TR 117-119, F 86-7).

Most of Montaigne's remarks on following the customs and laws of one's country occur in the context of discussion of the Civil Wars and the horrors that they brought. Most focus on human fallibility in attempts to bring about desired changes. In (B) he warns that those "who give the first shock to the state are apt to be the

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[52] Friedrich, *Montaigne*, p. 165, also traces this change in Montaigne's attitude toward custom.

first ones swallowed up in its ruin," and in (C) he adds that the "fruits of the trouble rarely go to the one who has stirred it up" (TR 118, F 87).

With the Civil Wars in mind, Montaigne asserts that imaginary descriptions of the best possible government are good only for debate or for a "new world." But "(B) not in theory, but in truth, the best and most excellent government for each nation is the one under which it has preserved its existence. Its form and essential fitness depend on habit". He quotes a contemporary poet: "Love your own state, and be it what it will". "Nothing presses a state so hard as innovation; change alone lends shape to injustice and tyranny" (TR 934-5, F 730-1). The crucial lesson is that good does not necessarily succeed evil; another evil may succeed it. Montaigne's declaration is: "(B) As long as the image of the ancient and accepted laws of this monarchy shines in some corner, there will I be planted" (TR 972, F 760). Against the monarchomachs, he writes that not even tyranny justifies "(B) so deadly a drug" as revolution against the established authorities (TR 1019, F 797).

In the Civil Wars, Montaigne fought for the royalist Catholic side. He made it clear that he thought that "(A) the best and soundest side is undoubtedly that which maintains both the old religion and the old government of the country", but not because that side had privileged claims to any kind of truth (TR 651, F 506). The old laws "(B) remain in credit not because they are just, but because they are laws", and thus serve to anchor the social sphere. They are "(C) often made by fools... but always by men, vain and irresolute authors". In fact, Montaigne is perfectly willing to assert that "there is nothing so grossly and widely and ordinarily faulty as the laws" (TR 1049, F 821). But that does not affect their binding authority. They are binding just "because they are laws".[53] A major consequence of this reasoning is that there is no room in Montaigne for Augustine's "lex turpis... non est lex".[54]

Montaigne's view, early and late, is that the old is always better than "(A) change and commotion" (TR 639, F497). The "(B) most

[53] Friedrich, *Montaigne*, p. 183, describes Montaigne's position as a response to, and a way of living with, the absurd.

[54] Cf. Carew Hunt, "Montaigne and the State", p. 270. Nor, on the other hand, did Montaigne accept Bodin's *rex legibus solutus*.

usual and common way of life is the best" (TR 1084, F 848). Part
of Montaigne's justification is that things that look bad are not
necessarily bad. "(B) All that totters does not fall" (TR 938, F
733). In any case, change may bring something even worse.

But Montaigne's vision is not wholly quietist. His admonitions
against change often have the tone of a rear-guard action, or of a
Cassandra. Montaigne recognizes that he cannot go against change:
the subjunctive is prominent in the famous line, "(A) if I could put
a spoke in our wheel and stop it at this point, I would do so with all
my heart" (TR 639, F 497). Montaigne knew that change was in-
evitable.[55]

Too much cannot be made of one word, but Montaigne's para-
phrase of Sextus is telling: he writes of the "*constitutions* des loix
et des coustumes", where Sextus had only written of laws and cus-
toms. Montaigne may be emphasizing the importance of the over-
arching constitution at the expense of particular rules and reg-
ulations; the *ordre*, not the ordinances. It is the "(B) foundations of
so great a structure" that he warns us not to meddle with (TR 935,
F 731). Since most of his strictures against changing the laws occur
in the context of the constitutional changes sought by the parties in
the Civil Wars, it is at least possible that those who seek changes
in the laws under the umbrella of the constitution would not come
in for as much criticism from Montaigne.

There is other evidence that Montaigne's vision of law and custom
is not as quietist as it has often been taken to be. Personally, he
recognizes that habits change: "I have no habit [façon] that has not
varied according to circumstances" (TR 1057, F 827). Indeed, there
are habits of change. The "(B) noblest and most useful" of the
teachings of habit is precisely the habit which accustoms and shapes
us "for change and variation". Military men, especially, "should get
accustomed to every change and vicissitude of life," and Montaigne
himself "was trained as much as possible for freedom and adap-
tation" (TR 1061, F 830). Montaigne may have had private life in
mind here, but it is easy to see that such habits could carry over
into the public sphere of customs and laws. We shall return to this
issue in the next chapter, in our discussion of Montaigne's

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[55] Friedrich, *Montaigne*, p. 183, observes that Montaigne knew that change
would come by itself, without need of our help.

conservatism. But first we shall examine the implications of the other Pyrrhonian rules of living.

## B. *Nature, the passions, and the arts*
The political implications of the other three Pyrrhonian rules of living are less direct, and their interpretation is more debatable. Recall that Montaigne reports that the Pyrrhonists "lend and accommodate themselves to natural inclinations, to the impulsion and restraint of passions,... and to the tradition of the arts". We shall proceed to examine some of the political implications of this way of living.

Following nature and natural inclinations in one form or another was, of course, the doctrine of most of the ancient schools of philosophy. The particular way in which nature is defined and the limits on this advice will determine what the specific political implications will be. One of Montaigne's discoveries, after reviewing man's many weaknesses, was that the very fallibility of man can serve to make him happy.[56] In political matters, in particular, our susceptibility to habit and custom is exactly what we need to achieve a peaceful and satisfying condition.

We can start with the relationship among the Pyrrhonian practices, which may have important political implications. For some purposes, Montaigne brings together the Pyrrhonist practice of abiding by laws and customs with the practice of following nature by subsuming man-made habits under nature. "(B) Let us also call the habits and condition of each of us nature," Montaigne writes. This is justified by the ancient chestnut: "Habit is a second nature, and no less powerful" (TR 987, F 772). The result is that laws and customs are given the legitimacy that attaches to nature.[57]

In some circumstances, this melding of custom and nature may be conservative, cloaking what is in the mantle of what must be. The conservative implications of following nature may also be reinforced by Montaigne's advice to follow the impulsion of the passions, where the political system and customs endorse those

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[56] Frame, *Montaigne's Discovery*, pp. 95ff.

[57] Gierczynski, "La Science", pp. 32-4, seems to agree with other writers that Montaigne's skepticism and naturalism require some sort of reconciliation. But we have seen in the previous chapters that the skeptics themselves claimed to live in accordance with nature as one of the "rules for living".

passions. But it is also potentially subversive. Montaigne's essay "On Some Verses of Virgil" amounts to a call for sexual liberation. In his own time, this was a violation of the laws and of principles endorsed by the church, if not of the customs of his class. A general endorsement of doing what comes naturally and following the passions is certainly potentially subversive of many laws and customs that attempt to control nature and passions.

But Montaigne is not prepared to give nature *carte blanche*. We have seen above that he opposed cruelty "by nature and by judgment". But he recognizes that nature "(B) herself attaches to man some instinct for inhumanity" (TR 412, F 316). This is something which Montaigne, at least, seeks to fight against. If other people are not revolted by cruelty, Montaigne has a basis for opposing them in his own nature and judgment. In effect, this may mean pitting one aspect of nature against another, and such a fight against nature may not be conservative.

Nor is Montaigne prepared to give the passions *carte blanche*, either. As his phrasing of the Pyrrhonists' advice goes, the passions must also be restrained. And Montaigne certainly has critical remarks to make about the passions in politics. He quotes Statius: "(C) Passion handles all things ill". "(B) Violent and tyrannical intensity of purpose" leads to "much imprudence and injustice" (TR 985, F 770).

Again, however, restraint of the passions does not mean killing them. In contrast to the advice of Lipsius and Charron,[58] Montaigne asserts that one should take sides in the Civil Wars, but only "(C) according to a deliberate plan," and with "(B) order and moderation" (TR 770, F 601). If suitably bridled passions require it, Montaigne writes, "(B) I do not want a man to refuse, to the charges he takes on, attention, steps, words, and sweat and blood if need be" (TR 984, F 770).

The last of the Pyrrhonian rules for living concerned following an art or trade. Montaigne does not endorse this rule in the literal sense of what Sextus probably had in mind; he never sought out an "art" as it was generally understood and he does not encourage others to do so. One recent commentator has suggested that he

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[58] Lipsius, *Sixe Bookes of Politickes or Civil Doctrine*, bk. 6, chap. 6; Charron, *Wisdome*, bk. 3, chap. 4, section 12.

shared the "prejudices of the minor nobility" of his time against the mechanical arts and in favour of the liberal arts.[59] Certainly the men he called "of the middle condition of life," neither called into political leadership nor required to earn a living, could survive without taking up an art. But even among the ancients, it is not clear that the advice to follow an art was based on economic grounds.

Some of Montaigne's practices can be assimilated to what the ancients evidently thought practicing an art was supposed to accomplish. As had been mentioned above, Montaigne is credited with inventing the genre of the essay. He spent a great deal of time during three decades working at this project. It was, as Montaigne tells us, taken up to occupy himself, to channel his grief and frustration. That may be what the ancient skeptics thought an art could do: keep one busy and out of trouble. Montaigne is sensitive to the relation between the identity of an individual and his occupation: "(C) each man in some form exists in his work" (TR 366, F 279). So it can be argued that he did indeed engage in an "art" in ancient terms. Self-study and writing about it were "(C) his work and his trade" (TR 648, F 504); more broadly, "(C) my trade and my art is living" (TR 359, F 274).

## 5. Conclusion

At this point it should be clear that Montaigne borrowed a great deal from the ancient skeptics, and that his borrowings gave him a vocabulary and strategies that helped him develop his political opinions. His roots in the tradition are unmistakeable. And yet any reader of Montaigne will agree that he was no slavish imitator of the ancients, which raises several questions.

How did Montaigne differ from the ancient skeptics? On one reading, hardly at all. Many of Montaigne's own reports on Pyrrho and Socrates make them in many respects practically interchangeable with his description of himself. This Pyrrho/Socrates/Montaigne character is an active, engaging, cheerful, inquiring skeptic. He values tranquillity, enjoys life, is involved in the world, and eschews philosophical dogma.

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[59] Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement*, p. 271.

Compared to other figures such as Aenesidemus, Sextus Empiricus, Arcesilaus, and Carneades, Montaigne was much more multi-dimensional. Aenesidemus is only remembered for his tropes, and the other figures seem to have spent most of their efforts collecting opposing arguments and setting them up in equipollence; beyond that all they did was report on the way of life of the skeptics. Although Montaigne did a great deal of collecting of equipollent opposites, he spent more time on the whole sifting among them, and using his best judgment to draw tentative conclusions from them. His morality of opposition to cruelty and politics of tolerance suggest a richer fleshing out of the politics of skepticism than anything we can glean from Aenesidemus, Sextus, Arcesilaus, or Carneades.

Where do the positive but non-dogmatic recommendations of Montaigne fit into the skeptical tradition? The foregoing figures all gave advice on how to live. If they did not flesh it out as carefully as Montaigne did, Cicero provides a model for this side of his work. For example, Cicero gives us thoughtful but non-dogmatic advice on friendship in *De Amicitia*, and on old age in *De Senectute*,[60] to take two areas which Montaigne explored as well. And while Pyrrho and Socrates never wrote anything, Cicero certainly did, providing a model for Montaigne.

Even Cicero, however, does not match the exploration of the meaning of selfhood and individualism that Montaigne conducts. Socrates told people to know themselves, but he tells us less about himself than we might have wanted to hear. Perhaps Montaigne's major contribution to the tradition of skepticism was to bring the self into it in a big way. And this focus on the individual and on the self would certainly have implications for politics, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Did Montaigne's skepticism make him a conservative, a liberal, or a radical in politics? That is the question that will be addressed in the next chapter.

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[60] Glucker, "Cicero's philosophical affiliations", p. 68, claims that these books of Cicero are dogmatic, largely because of their appeal to traditional authority. But Cicero does not appeal to authority because it is true; and we have seen that skeptics often claimed to live in accordance with customs and traditions without compromising their basically skeptical stance.

# SKEPTICAL IDEOLOGIES IN MONTAIGNE

In a fashion that he would have appreciated, Montaigne has been accused of supporting almost every recognized political ideology. He is most often charged with conservatism, but also often with liberalism, radicalism, and other "-isms", and his work has been appropriated by partisans of all of these persuasions. The foregoing chapter has examined some of the chief elements of a skeptical politics in Montaigne in their own terms. In this chapter we shall review his ideas in terms of the political ideologies of conservatism, liberalism, and radicalism, to see what light the above materials on skepticism throw on claims that Montaigne's politics belongs in one or more of those categories. All of these labels are of later coinage, and will require some definition in our exploration of them.

## 1. *Montaigne's conservatism*

Most commentators have declared without much explanation that Montaigne's politics is "deeply conservative" or "an almost Burkean form of conservatism."[1] Some recognize that it is "based on his general skepticism about the powers of reason" or call it "Pyrrhonian conservatism," but most of these have not drawn out the connections between skepticism and politics.[2]

Two writers who have focused on politics, however, have drawn up stark indictments of Montaigne's alleged conservatism. Half a century ago, one of the neo-Marxist founders of Critical Theory wrote that Montaigne's philosophy is a philosophy for "the wealthy" that "sacrifices truth to power," represents a "retreat to self-

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[1] Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, p. 108; Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2:283.

[2] Skinner, *ibid.*; Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, p. 49. In spite of the title, Limbrick, "La Vie politique et juridique: considerations sceptiques dans les Essais", does not really explore the connections between skepticism and politics. Limbrick also characterizes Montaigne's position as "fundamental political conservatism" (p. 207).

interest," and, of course, defends his own class of bourgeois arrivistes.[3] Recently, an American scholar has indicted Montaigne's skepticism for its "inherently conservative moral stance" which eliminates "the possibility of independent criteria for criticising traditional authority".[4] Any characterization of Montaigne's politics must come to terms with these claims.

Those who argue that Montaigne was fundamentally conservative can draw on important statements that he made. "(A) The knowledge of his duty should not be left to each man's judgment; it should be prescribed to him," he wrote.[5] "(C) People who judge and check their judges never submit to them as they ought" (TR 486, F 375). If conservatism is taken to imply "law and order" and strict obedience to the traditional authority of church and state, these statements ought to qualify as conservative. But when these statements are juxtaposed with much of the material quoted above, Montaigne's position becomes much more ambivalent.

A recent neo-Hegelian attempt to see Montaigne whole sets Montaigne's politics into a three stage model: from fear of passionate action to withdrawal from politics to temperate action. Jean Starobinski observes that "Montaigne's intellectual [skepsis] entails neither political abstention nor refusal to act nor peace at any price". Temperate action is based on thorough, skeptical criticism; and Montaigne's essays include profound criticism of both sides in the Civil Wars, the conquest of America, and other political behaviour. Along these lines, as we have seen, the good man will withdraw from involvement in evil; skepticism also undermines any justification of evil on the grounds that it will bring good. And this author argues at length that Montaigne was never a conservative in the sense of opposing progress, simply because the idea of progress did not yet exist.[6]

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[3] Horkheimer, "Montaigne und die Funktion der Skepsis", 2:210, 217, 205.

[4] Hiley, *Philosophy in Question: Essays on a Pyrrhonian Theme*, p. 24.

[5] Thibaudet and Rat, eds., *Montaigne*, p. 467; Frame, trans., *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, p. 359. The translations have been borrowed, with some emendations, from the Frame edition. Further citations are in the text, with the French edition identified as "TR" and the English version identified as "F". In the text, (A) = 1580 edition, (B) = 1588 edition, (C) = post-1588 editions, including the Bordeaux copy.

[6] Starobinski, *Montaigne en Mouvement*, pp. 318ff. As we shall see below,

Starobinski provides a good point of departure because he emphasizes kinds of conservatism that Montaigne did not endorse. Given the protean and contested nature of the term "conservative," the best way to approach the issue may be to distinguish different kinds of conservatism, and see how they are handled by Montaigne. There are many kinds of conservatism that Montaigne's is not.

One recent commentator rightly warns against anachronistic understandings of the "conservative" label, but concludes that it is fair enough to use it in the limited sense of Montaigne's opposition to change.[7] We have already seen, however, that Montaigne's opposition is to change in the public sphere, not the private sphere. Change in the private sphere is potentially subversive of the public sphere as well. Thus, Montaigne's is not a conservatism of internal stagnation and conformism.

Closely related is Montaigne's general preference for privacy. We have seen that although public commitment is desirable, it is never total. His allegiance is only a matter of externals. In practice, this means a critical stance, and as we have seen, there are some things an independent, thinking citizen will not do. Thus, Montaigne's is not a conservatism of unlimited commitment to church or state.

When conservatism is discussed, it is particularly important to emphasize the historical circumstances that are or are not being conserved. As Montaigne put it, "(B) civic innocence is measured according to the places and the times" (TR 972, F 760). The Civil Wars were a time of widespread brutality and cruelty, as Montaigne often observes. His *Essays* stand in contrast to the 1570 edition of the *Commentaires* of Blaise de Monluc, with their aristocratic acceptance of rape, plunder, and killing.[8] As one commentator has observed, most of Montaigne's stories from the past describe violence, mayhem, slaughter, mutilation, and death, and he consistently opposes such behaviour.[9] In "De la gloire," Montaigne

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other authors have found the notion of progress in Montaigne's work.

[7] Burke, *Montaigne*, p. 28.

[8] But see Michel, "L'homme de colère et l'homme de paix! Monluc, Montaigne", for some similarities between the two men.

[9] O'Loughlin, *The Garlands of Repose*, p. 248. Alfredo Bonadeo's "Montaigne on War" usefully contrasts Montaigne's position with the more sanguine views of contemporaries like Bacon, Bodin, Botero, and Monluc. Montaigne's book could hardly appeal to soldiers the way Lipsius's could (cf. Oestreich, *Neostoicism in the*

undermines aristocratic glory; in "De l'incommodité de la grandeur," he expresses exactly the opinion implied in the title. His is not an aristocratic conservatism of admiration for brutality, cruelty, and glory.

The preceding form of conservatism is often closely related to another form of politics, which may or may not be conservative. This is what one author has described as the "politics of suspicion" or "politics of distrust" of such figures as Bodin and Botero.[10] Whatever may have been his actual practice as negotiator and as a writer, at least on the surface Montaigne always called for openness and sincerity in political endeavours.

It is true that Montaigne made some disparaging remarks about the lower orders (as he did of the higher orders). But, as we shall see below, those who call Montaigne a democrat draw on his expressions of respect for their behaviour in hard times, his sympathetic report on a Brazilian cannibal's question about the treatment of our "other halves," and his evidently genuine concern with their suffering. His was not a conservatism of contempt for the masses.

The problem with calling Montaigne's conservatism "almost Burkean" is that Burke's view of the ancient constitution was that it was almost holy, representing accumulated wisdom and reflecting the natural rights of the English. Montaigne's view, as we have seen, is that the existing constitution should be supported only because it is the existing constitution, but without any further apparatus of legitimacy. The variety of customs, equipollence, and ensuing suspension of judgement undermine conservatism based on harmonious design or on natural law. Nobody can claim privileged access to truths that undergird any political institution. Montaigne is thus conservative in a sense that does not draw its legitimacy from "eternal truths". A recent commentator is right to observe that Montaigne's thought does not suffer from even the "possibility of totalitarian interpretation".[11]

Montaigne's skeptical confession of ignorance and critique of causation undermine the pretensions of any prudence or science of

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*Early Modern State*, p. 29).

[10] Nakam, "La Mairie de Bordeaux dans les Essais: quelques grands principes de la conduite politique de Montaigne".

[11] Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement*, p. 365.

politics, thus excluding the claims of conservative contemporaries such as Lipsius or Bodin who believed that they understood that prudence, and excluding the claims of conservative modern political scientists ranging from Daniel Bell to Marxists. He does not condone a conservatism that says that scientific analysis can tell us how to live.

Montaigne's own life, even after retirement from the Parlement, was certainly not apolitical nor a total withdrawal from the public sphere. He writes of negotiations with princes, of standing guard all night in times of war, and of serving as advisor to men of influence. He was at the siege of La Fère in 1580, and prided himself on his relationship to Henry of Navarre, later Henry IV, even while the latter was nominally a Protestant. As mayor of Bordeaux, strongly worded Remonstrances were sent to the king in his name (TR 1373-9, F1068-73).[12] He was, as he put it, taking a carefully thought out, but then active, role in public life. There is no call for the *vita contemplativa* to the exclusion of the *vita activa*. His was not a conservatism of withdrawal.

It is true that Montaigne recommended obedience to the laws and acceptance of the religion of one's native land. Lipsius drew on similar skeptical arguments to justify repression of heresy by the absolute state in the interest of stability.[13] But Montaigne was much more ambivalent, observing that repression might suppress faction, but just as well might encourage it. He sympathizes with the emperor Julian, who was not a cruel enemy, "not touching blood", in contrast to the "cruelty of some Christians" (TR 652-4, F 507-9). The whole tenor of his discussion of toleration, from the opening lines about vicious acts, is against repression. One concludes that he favours the less cruel path. He did not follow his fellow *politique* Bodin into a conservatism of eager support for absolute government, and this sets him off from later thinkers like Charron and Hobbes as well.

There should be no doubt that there is a strong element of conservatism in Montaigne's writings. This is a man who can write that "(B) nothing presses a state hard except innovation; change alone

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[12] See Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps: Les événements et les Essais* and Frame, *Montaigne: A Biography*.

[13] See Tuck, "Scepticism and Toleration in the Seventeenth Century".

lends shape to injustice and tyranny", and remind us that "(C) good does not necessarily succeed evil; another evil may succeed it" (TR 935; F 731). But we have seen that to describe Montaigne's politics as "conservative" requires a substantial amount of qualification. It is not conservative in many senses of the word, including those of Horkheimer and Hiley. In the light of the materials we have seen in the previous chapter, perhaps the best characterization of this side of Montaigne would be as a "skeptical conservative."

## B. *Montaigne's liberalism*

Against the mainstream of interpretation, André Gide wrote that "what Montaigne teaches us especially is what was called at a much later day 'liberalism'".[14] The portrait presented by an influential recent translator of Montaigne into English suggests that Montaigne's "discovery of man" made him some form of liberal.[15] We shall have to be careful here with our definitions, but it is safe to say that rarely do we think of liberalism and conservatism as overlapping in the seventeenth century. Thus, we are faced with opposing arguments, which Montaigne and any skeptic would delight in bringing into juxtaposition.[16]

Gide quoted Emerson on Montaigne's "liberality," and Emerson in turn quoted Gibbon. But Gibbon wrote only that Montaigne was an exception to the "general ferment of fanaticism, discord, and faction" of his times.[17] Emerson went on to say that although Montaigne was "no conservative... neither was he fit to work with any democratic party... for parties wish every one committed." Emerson's conclusion was that "a wise skeptic is a bad citizen,"[18] but surely we do not have to accept that characterization of the citizen who avoids fanaticism, discord, and faction. Rather, one

[14] Gide, "Montaigne", p. 590.

[15] Frame, *Montaigne's Discovery of Man: The Humanization of a Humanist*; Frame, *Montaigne: A Biography*.

[16] In fact, the very extensive scholarly literature contains a wide variety of imaginable (and some unimaginable) interpretations of Montaigne, which can be brought into instructive juxtaposition. Contrast the subtitle of Frame's book, mentioned in the previous footnote, with Citoleux's *Le Vrai Montaigne: Théologien et soldat*. But we will limit our discussion here to three political "-isms".

[17] Gibbon, *The English Essays of Edward Gibbon*, p. 89.

[18] Emerson, *Representative Men*, p. 97.

might expect that some kinds of conservatives as well as liberals and even radicals would disclaim such behaviour. The wise skeptic might be a good citizen, by his own lights, precisely because he avoids extremes. But this gets us no nearer to a characterization of Montaigne as liberal, except that if he is, he is a skeptical liberal.

Paradoxical contraries of interpretation of Montaigne as conservative or liberal do not end simply with authors lining up on one side or the other. Horkheimer was more concerned to criticize what he took to be skeptical acquiescence in the face of National Socialism than to tarnish Montaigne's name, so he readily admitted that Montaigne's skepticism was progressive for its time: a defense of modernizing absolutism against reactionary forces, in Marxist terms. He even uses Montaigne against the contemporary skeptics who are his philosophical descendants: Montaigne would not have gone along with the fascists.[19] Hence, Montaigne was progressive in his own day but his political philosophy has retrogressive tendencies today. This is the opposite of the conclusion of one of the better modern commentators, who suggests that Montaigne's politics was conservative of existing institutions in his own day, but that his emphasis on individualism and the undermining of other institutional supports was subversive in the long run.[20] Many scholars have concluded that Montaigne was a practical conservative and a theoretical liberal or radical.[21]

The most sustained recent treatment of Montaigne's politics champions the view that Montaigne was very much a liberal. Indeed, David Schaefer writes, he was "one of the first philosophical advocates of the modern liberal regime" and his work offers "an almost comprehensive catalogue of the fundamental tenets of classical political liberalism".[22] That catalog includes individual security under the law; freedom of worship and choice of life style; protection of property and exchange by contract; individualism and diversity; and more. This is an interpretation to be reckoned with.

The thrust of Schaefer's argument is that Montaigne's writings

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[19] Horkheimer, "Funktion der Skepsis", pp. 235, 239.

[20] Sayce, *The Essays of Montaigne*, p. 259.

[21] See the discussion in Heck, "Montaigne's Conservatism and Liberalism: A Paradox?".

[22] Schaefer, *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne*, pp. 375-76. References to this book in the following paragraphs will be in parentheses in the text.

represent a political project pursued with consistency and rhetorical ingenuity throughout the *Essays*. His appeal to skepticism was designed to undermine the church as well as ancient philosophy, but beneath the surface of his writings a positive, dogmatic purpose can be found, which amounts to the promotion of liberalism. Montaigne wants to bring men down to earth, to disengage politics from concern with salvation, virtue, and glory, all of which lead to cruelty and suffering. He wants politics to focus on utility, and to leave men alone as much as possible to pursue their own hedonistic ends.

Schaefer contextualizes Montaigne's project largely as a dialogue with Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli.[23] Montaigne's novelty, in this interpretation, is his disagreement with the ancients on fundamental points. Rather than resorting to 'noble lies' to mask the incompatibility of philosophy and the state, Schaefer writes, Montaigne believed that philosophy and the state could be made compatible by lowering expectations from the state and convincing people that philosophy could help them in their pursuit of hedonism. Montaigne "may well have been... the one who originally worked out the modifications of Machiavelli's doctrine that gave rise to modern liberalism" (395), anticipating the work of Hobbes and Locke.

Schaefer's interpretive principles emphasize Montaigne's rhetoric. Passages that do not fit his overall interpretation can be explained as self-protective cryptic writing and irony. For example, Montaigne's insistence that skepticism would actually reaffirm faith allowed him to use it as a "Trojan Horse" (82). Schaefer's ultimate principle of analysis is that Montaigne wrote such that "men of understanding" will recognize his big project, and the vulgar will be both overtly urged and sub-consciously massaged into absorbing attitudes that will facilitate that project (e.g., 37-8, 132, 144-5, 150, 370).

Schaefer's interpretation is unusual in the secondary literature in quite a number of respects. On the basis of Montaigne's "attestation of the value of learning [and] his express wish that philosophy should uncover the structure and mode of operation of the heavens,

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[23] He also neatly contextualizes Montaigne in the literature of North American students and admirers of Leo Strauss, with references to the work of more than a score of such scholars.

the causes of our sense perceptions, and the nature of our bodily constitution", and other evidence, Schaefer concludes that Montaigne was a forerunner and proponent of the scientific method and scientific progress (131). This by no means reflects the general thrust and weight of Montaigne's writings on the subject: he says a lot more against the value of learning than in favor, and his "express wish" sounds more like wishful thinking than a serious program. Schaefer recognizes Montaigne's "peculiarly backhanded way of expressing his thoughts on science", but he explains it as part of his rhetorical strategy for dealing with the dual audiences of "men of understanding" and the many (131-2).

On the basis of his anti-monarchical assertions, his egalitarian remarks, his pride in his Roman citizenship, and other evidence, Schaefer concludes that Montaigne was actually a surreptitious (but only thinly veiled) republican (171ff). Republicans are not usually tolerant of liberal individualism, but Schaefer suggests that Montaigne believed that republicanism can be squared with liberalism if the many can be weaned from their religious superstitions and taught to value individualism and philosophy (175). This leaves an open question as to whether the resulting republicanism is so denatured as to no longer deserve the name.

If Schaefer is right, Montaigne was no skeptic. On this interpretation Montaigne's use of skepticism was only ancillary to his dogmatism, and Schaefer suggests that this means that he was a dogmatic skeptic, even more of a dogmatist than Plato (149-50). On this view, Montaigne was a dogmatic liberal.

And Schaefer may be right. Although readers may disagree with particular arguments, his global interpretation cannot be disproved as long as anything that Montaigne says that undercuts it can be explained away as irony or cryptic writing. But one problem with this kind of explanation is that it can cut in too many ways. How do we know that Montaigne's pro-liberal, pro-republican, pro-scientific remarks and insinuations are the true Montaigne, and the opposite ones represent only camouflage and irony? Maybe he inserted the liberal material just to flush proto-liberals out of hiding so they could be caught. This sounds outlandish, but can be constructed with the same sort of argument that Schaefer uses to make Montaigne into a liberal. Why stop at the point where a consistently liberal Montaigne emerges? Maybe he knew that *real* "men of understanding" would know that he could not possibly have intended

to promote liberalism, and that anything to that effect was to be construed as irony. We shall return to this problem below.

A substantial amount of what Schaefer writes actually makes a lot of sense, and thus the question is how far to go with him. One can agree with him that on the whole Montaigne seems to prefer the gentler liberal virtues, and that the long-run effect of his writings had some of the subversive implications that Schaefer thinks he intended, but without seeing this as part of a single-minded dogmatic design. The following considerations militate further against accepting Schaefer's view in its full extent, and in favor of retaining the skeptical reading of the foregoing chapter.

Schaefer goes too far when he writes that Montaigne wants to reduce human ambitions to nothing but physical hedonism (e.g. 261, 274, 308, 332-4). He goes too far when he claims that Montaigne in fact approves of full-blown Machiavellianism. He goes too far when he concludes that Montaigne's work "reflects a political ambition" which surpasses "that of his ancient philosophic predecessors", such that Montaigne "aspires to become a kind of super-ruler of generations of human beings, extending into the indefinite (if not infinite) future, thereby achieving a glory rivaling or surpassing that of the greatest founder-lawgivers" (pp. 395-6). Montaigne undoubtedly had his literary ambitions, but describing them like this sounds like a parody. It implies that almost any writer on politics may be accused of aspiring to become a "super-ruler", and seems to muddle the proper distinction between literary and more strictly political ambitions.

Schaefer must explain away Montaigne's eulogy of skepticism in the "Apology" if he is to defend the dogmatic reading of Montaigne. To do so, he purports to find "more than a hint of ridicule" in Montaigne's description of Pyrrhonism as "(A) a perpetual confession of ignorance, a judgment without leaning or inclination, on any occasion whatever..." (83).[24] But it is certainly possible to read this as a good-faith characterization of Pyrrhonism, matching the self-characterizations of the ancient skeptics. The only clear

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[24] Schaefer quotes a larger selection of Montaigne's remarks than is reproduced in the text above, but it seems unlikely that his interpretation rides on the part that has been left out. Readers are encouraged to consult the original in its larger context (TR 485, F 374).

justification for reading it as ridicule is that otherwise it will not fit into Schaefer's interpretive grid.

When Montaigne later retails Diogenes's stories about Pyrrho having to be saved from walking off cliffs by his friends "without any accompanying expression of disbelief", Schaefer believes that he is signalling "his own ultimate rejection" of Pyrrhonism (117). But considering that Montaigne has already rejected those stories in the "Apology", this could just as well be irony or cryptic writing, perhaps intended to throw critics off the trail. Making fun of the false Pyrrho does not necessarily tell us anything about his view of the true Pyrrho. Again, everything will turn on one's interpretive grid.

Schaefer writes that another author is wrong to claim that "for Montaigne, Pyrrho was the model of the sage" (83n.).[25] That author "does not sufficiently acknowledge the distinction between Montaigne's putative skepticism and the doctrines of classical skepticism" (43n.) and fails "to appreciate the skeptical character of classical philosophy as a whole" (83n.). Schaefer argues that when Montaigne says favorable things about "Pyrrhonians" he is really saying them about "true philosophers" (85), such that "much of his ostensible exposition of Pyrrhonism is actually a description of *the philosophic way of life in general*" (84), which was (with footnote references here to Leo Strauss) "strictly speaking a *quest for wisdom*" (83). Schaefer proceeds to suggest that since there is no difference at the level of epistemology, the chief difference between dogmatists and skeptics is over how philosophy should present itself in public. The real skeptics such as Aristotle (and presumably Plato) chose to hide their uncertainty from the people, and Montaigne emerges as a dogmatist mostly because he thinks that philosophical doubts can be made public (85-6)!

The problem with this reading of "Montaigne's putative skepticism" in relation to "the doctrines of classical skepticism" and the "skeptical character of classical philosophy as a whole" is that rather than proving that Pyrrho was no model for Montaigne, it suggests that virtually all of ancient philosophy worthy of the name and properly understood was Pyrrhonian. This is certainly con-

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[25] Schaefer is criticizing Zbigniew Gierczysnki here; the quote is from "La Science de l'ignorance de Montaigne", p. 35.

sistent with Montaigne's portrait of the skeptical Socrates, as we have seen above. Then the only thing wrong with Montaigne's summary of Sextus's report that the Peripatetics and the Academics were dogmatists but that Pyrrho and his disciples "say that they are still in search of the truth" (TR 482, F371-2) is that Aristotle belongs with the skeptics. If Montaigne was following Aristotle, Plato, or Socrates in epistemology, then his "putative skepticism" was real skepticism. But in the final analysis, Schaefer is apparently claiming that Montaigne was not an epistemological skeptic like the true philosophers because he was a dogmatist in politics. Rather than the dogmatic skepticism of Schaefer's earlier accusation, it turns out that now Montaigne is really being accused of dogmatic liberalism.

Schaefer has certainly performed a service in reminding us that Montaigne's rhetoric and style of writing makes it possible to find almost any intentions in it. This raises a methodological problem which is encountered time and again in the study of Montaigne. Once we decide that Montaigne is not altogether sincere,[26] any number of interpretations can be sustained by blocking out inconsistent statements as irony or disguise.[27] How can one interpretation be preferred over another?[28] To return to the point with which we began our analysis of Schaefer's argument, the problem is that we are on treacherous ground here, and this sort of argument proves too much. One suspects that a similar book could be written to show that Montaigne was a conservative or a radical at heart, and everything else was cryptic writing and irony. A *reductio ad absurdum* of Schaefer's method would be to make the same case for Sextus Empiricus, or for Pyrrho or any other skeptic, as a liberal. They can all be read as proto-liberals by bringing out their rejection of prevailing dogmas and building up, e.g., the "four rules of

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[26] This *topos* has become widespread in the literature. See Ballaguy, "La sincérité de Montaigne"; Bowen, *The Age of Bluff: Paradox and Ambiguity in Rabelais and Montaigne*, pp. 103-106.

[27] In chapter one we have already mentioned an earlier version of this problem to the effect that Sextus was insincere. See Glidden, "Skeptic Semiotics".

[28] Hans-Georg Gadamer has pointed out that "it is by no means clear that when we find contradictory statements in a writer, it is correct to take the hidden meaning—as Strauss thinks—as his true opinion", in "Hermeneutik und Historismus", *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, p. 539.

living" into positive liberal dogma.

Again, however, Schaefer has not supplied a convincing explanation of just why his principles of interpretation should be accepted. He accepts Montaigne's assertions that he never makes an unintentional mistake (2), that his chapter titles provide clues to the meaning of each chapter, that he disguises and alters passages borrowed from other authors (297), and that his description of Mannerist painting reveals his own way of writing (40), among others. Why are just these statements privileged? How do we know that they are not irony? It might be an interesting exercise to imagine what Montaigne would have said if he had been confronted with Schaefer's interpretation. "Ah, you have unmasked me!" or "No, you have me wrong!"? But what principles would we use to interpret that answer? How do we know it is not irony?

Schaefer criticizes other authors for recognizing Montaigne's irony in some cases but failing to see it in others (18). The problem here is that if you go too far down the slippery slope of explanations in terms of cryptic writing and irony, there is no firm place to stop. The account offered in the foregoing chapter falls in with those who recognize Montaigne's subtlety and irony in many instances, but take much of what he says at face value. The question of what is to be taken as irony and what as the real Montaigne is a question for good judgment, considering the overall effect of reading Montaigne. One can hope that this procedure does not betray too much naivete. In the last analysis, however, it cannot disprove Schaefer's claims, and can only be offered as a competing interpretation.

We have spent so much time with Schaefer's book because it is the most sustained recent effort to prove that Montaigne's politics was fundamentally liberal.[29] In addition to the larger question of the interpretation of Montaigne's skepticism, some of the difficulties with Schaefer's characterization of Montaigne's liberalism merit brief mention. To take one of the liberal principles that Schaefer

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[29] Others who read Montaigne as a liberal include Gillespie, "Montaigne's Humanist Liberalism", and Brown, *Religious and Political Conservatism in the Essais of Montaigne*. The range and manifold uses of these terms can be observed by contrasting the title of Brown's book with her claim that "far from being in contradiction with each other, Montaigne's conservatism and liberalism were necessarily complementary" (p. 96).

identifies, it is hard to come away from reading Montaigne with the idea that he was as sanguine about the rule of law as Schaefer suggests. True, when Montaigne writes that there is "no remedy" for the failings of human justice and that it is better to avoid it (TR 1048, F 820), we can say this was irony, intended to make men think, and to convert them to the liberal rule of law. But maybe he really meant it.

To take another liberal principle, Schaefer is probably right to believe that Montaigne was broadly egalitarian. But there is very little suggestion in his writings that he was ready to contemplate a liberal *politics* of the common man. There is nothing about representative democracy or participation of the common man in political debate, in counsel, in voting, and so forth. To say that the common people have fortitude or courage in battle and in the face of death, as Montaigne did, is a long way from saying that they should be actively involved in liberal politics. Much of this can be explained by pointing out that no example of a liberal polity was available to Montaigne, and that it is anachronistic to expect him to have called for one. But Schaefer's argument makes precisely the claim that he foresaw the chief elements of modern liberalism.

We can accept some of what Schaefer says, interpreting Montaigne as sympathetic to many liberal or proto-liberal values, and yet maintain the view that Montaigne was in large part a skeptic. On this reading, Montaigne was not dogmatic about his liberalism, and Schaefer has read into the text a dogmatism that is unwarranted. This interpretation is consistent with our review in the early chapters of this book of the potential compatibility of liberalism and skepticism. As in the case of his conservatism, it requires us to qualify Montaigne's liberalism as a skeptical liberalism.

## C. *Montaigne's radicalism*

There is yet another set of interpretations of Montaigne's politics, which will be characterized here as "radicalism". This term requires some explaining, to distinguish it from the earlier categories, since there are at least two senses to the word. In one sense, it means only to call for a major change. In this sense, Montaigne's purported liberalism was a radical break from the traditional church

and government of his time[30], although it might not seem radical and in fact might seem conservative today. In the same sense, Montaigne's alleged conservatism actually might seem radical today, since it would require major changes.

In another sense, however, which will be used here, radicalism can be taken to refer to alternatives to both sixteenth century conservatism and modern liberalism. Liberalism presumes a certain egalitarianism, but it is still a far cry from pure democracy, and thus if Montaigne was a thorough-going democrat he may have been a radical in this sense. Liberalism has become conservative in the sense that it now defends the status quo, and thus if Montaigne were understood to be perpetually at odds with fixed political establishments, his politics would not be specifically liberal but would perhaps qualify as radical. Finally, opposition to liberalism and conservatism from anarchistic or nihilistic positions could qualify as radical in this second sense. These three categories may not be inclusive, but are supplied only to indicate something of the range of alternative political positions that can be found in Montaigne.

Donald Frame has characterized Montaigne virtually as a democrat, and other scholars have collected the evidence.[31] It is undeniable that Montaigne expressed sympathy and respect for even the poorest of human beings. But, as we have already seen, he clearly did not seek representative democracy, much less pure democracy; and did not envision a politics of the lower classes. Although it is true that for Montaigne the elites have no monopoly on truth, neither does the *demos*. References to the unfair tax burdens on the poor in the Remonstrances demonstrate that he was ready to take action to change social relations or improve the lot of the poor in a systematic way, but it is significant that nothing of the sort appears in his *Essays*.

Géralde Nakam writes of the "audacious novelty" of the 1588

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[30] Schaefer, *Montaigne's Political Philosophy*, p. 32, describes Montaigne's liberal program as aiming at "a radical transformation of the political and social order".

[31] Frame, *Montaigne's Discovery*, especially pp. 164-8; Frame, *Montaigne: A Biography*, pp. 300-302; David, "Quelques aspects démocratiques de la philosophie de Montaigne". Cf. Williamson, "On the Liberalizing of Montaigne: a Remonstrance". Williamson's article assimilates democracy to liberalism, while the present chapter distinguishes them.

edition of the Essays and suggests that Montaigne's calls for a simpler, more sensible law code amount to seeking a "democratization" of the law.[32] In some sense they do. But Nakam also points out that the Protestants in Montaigne's Bordeaux were social revolutionaries, and that Montaigne does not mention this.[33] Was he unaware of it? Did he deliberately suppress information or comments about it? In either case, he could not have been a full-blown democrat.

If Montaigne was not a democrat, that does not automatically place him back with the quietists. Montaigne's advice to follow habit and custom could actually require political action, in at least two scenarios. In a de facto constitutionalist (but not ancient or metaphysically constitutionalist) sense, if the constitution of a country requires political participation then Montaigne's advice would seem to encourage such action. His country permitted a certain amount of participation by the nobility, and this may be the justification for his own activities, including the Remonstrances. If a constitution required participation of all citizens, presumably Montaigne would have gone along with it. This "skeptical constitutionalism" probably falls in that gray area of contested territory between conservatism and liberalism.

But following custom may even lead to radical political activities, where they are the custom, as we have seen in our discussion of the ancient skeptics in chapter two. Where customs and laws encourage assassination, defenestration, and even revolution, the skeptic who follows custom would apparently have to engage in such activities. Modern examples reviewed in chapter two include Thomas Jefferson's vision of watering the tree of liberty with the blood of revolution every twenty years, and Mao Zedong's institutionalization of revolution in twentieth-century China. This last set of implications of the skeptical rules for living might have been too much for Montaigne to swallow, but the important thing for our purposes is to see that the implications of his skepticism are potentially radical in the second sense mentioned above.

As a matter of historical record, Montaigne's writings actually

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[32] Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps: les événements et les Essais*, p. 188; p. 76 note; pp. 164-8.

[33] Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps*, p. 73.

inspired more than one radical revolutionary. A good example is William Walwyn, one of the most radical of the Levellers during the English Civil War. In *Walwyn's Just Defence*, he reported that his emancipatory self-education owed much to reading Montaigne, and he quoted liberally from the *Essays*.[34]

We have seen that although he advises following customs, Montaigne does not hesitate to criticize them. This skeptical critique of contemporary customs, both liberal and conservative, was potentially revolutionary, pointing to some radical alternative. One commentator has suggested that his work was revolutionary, albeit "against his own will" and maybe even "without his knowing it."[35] Considering how well Montaigne knew himself, this claim is hard to believe. Rather, one should simply recognize that Montaigne balances the radical thrust of his critique with the conservative advice to go along with customs in most instances. Skepticism meant living with fallibility, not getting around it.

Montaigne's cosmopolitanism may be interpreted as a radical cosmopolitanism. Recall that he is ready to leave his country if its laws so much as threaten the tip of his finger (TR 1049, F 821). His anti-legalism, reviewed above, verges on anarchism. Both of these positions are subversive of both conservatism and liberalism, as usually understood.

Another commentator points to the radical implications of Montaigne's rhetoric. "According to one reading... the book is empty of all meaning; all its apparent propositions are provisional and reversible; the reader can learn nothing from what Montaigne writes". Neither liberal nor conservative, he blocks the "reader's attempt to make it into a moral handbook."[36] On this interpretation, Montaigne is some sort of nihilist,[37] a Nietzsche *avant la lettre*. This commentator goes on to write that this reading is not incompatible with a more positive reading, in which Montaigne's book is "an extraordinarily rich compendium of the epistemological

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[34] Walwyn, *Walwyn's Just Defence* (1649), reprinted in Haller and Davies, *The Leveller Tracts*, esp. pp. 364-67.

[35] Aymonier, "Les opinions politiques de Montaigne", p. 220.

[36] Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance*, p. 319.

[37] Gierczynski, "Le scepticisme de Montaigne, principe de l'équilibre de l'esprit", p. 122, concludes that Montaigne arrives at "a complete nihilism".

and moral arguments available to a secular writer in the later sixteenth century".[38] Precisely what political position such a compendium implies is not clear. But the self-referential character of Montaigne's skepticism softens its impact, in philosophy, in morality, and in politics.

A complete review of Montaigne's politics requires an interpretation of what he did *not* say, along with interpretation of what he did. There are a number of silences in the work, but perhaps the most striking is his omission of all but the most indirect mention of the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day in 1572. This was surely one of the most significant and notorious political events of Montaigne's lifetime. One recent scholar dismisses explanations to the effect that Montaigne's neglect of the matter was either careless or revealed a bad conscience about his own complicity. Rather, it was both a sign of fidelity to Chancellor L'Hôpital (and his policy of tolerance) and an eloquent appeal for a politics of forgetting and reconciliation.[39] Sheer forgetfulness is neither conservative nor liberal, but rather requires all such partisans to put aside their differences. As Montaigne protested, in his own day both sides would accuse him of siding with the other (TR 1021, F 798). A politics of forgetfulness is radical in the sense that it rejects the history and grievances of all political traditions.

Democratic, anarchistic, nihilistic, and other anti-conservative and anti-liberal sentiments can unquestionably be found in Montaigne's *Essays*. However, it is hard to give them precedence over the conservative and liberal elements.[40] A balanced assessment must take all of these elements into consideration.

To attempt such an assessment, we shall start with a recognition of Montaigne's conservatism. The havoc of the Civil Wars clearly gave Montaigne a great sense of the fragility of public authority, and surely inspired many of his more conservative comments. Nevertheless, his support of public authority was always limited by the skeptical denial of any truth to it.

The suggestion that Montaigne's individualism, if not revolu-

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[38] Cave, *ibid*.

[39] Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps*, pp. 100-3, 134.

[40] As Friedrich, *Montaigne*, p. 183, puts it, Montaigne avoids the extremes of the "idealism of the revolutionary" and the "nihilism of the despairing".

tionary, was subversive in the long run, is probably true, and
represents his greatest contribution to what later became the tra-
dition of liberalism. The separation of public and private, and the
things that a man need not do for his king or country, became fer-
tile ground for liberal principles. We do not get a full-blown
defence of the liberal principle of freedom of the press in the
*Essays*, but Montaigne's claim that his own writings could be mere-
ly private and no threat to the state surely served as a precedent for
later defences of this freedom, such as in Spinoza and Kant. But
there is no indication that Montaigne thought that such liberal
principles were infallible panaceas.

Attempts to categorize Montaigne as conservative or liberal always
founder on the shoals of his radicalism, defined as criticism of both
of these ideologies. But even this radicalism is always undercut by
Montaigne's skepticism.

The upshot is that *Essays* contain all of the above "-isms", and
none of them. It has not been our purpose to show that Montaigne
was in no sense a conservative, a liberal, or a radical; we have seen
that elements of each of these can be found in his work. But where
Montaigne is a conservative, he is a skeptical conservative; where
he is a liberal, he is a skeptical liberal; and where he is a radical,
he is a skeptical radical. Between an unskeptical quietism and an
unskeptical radicalism Montaigne finds a lot of room for maneu-
vering. This space is a particularly appropriate place for the
exercise of the judgment that he cultivated. Human fallibility is
what makes judgment so important; it is a matter of making
decisions in conditions of uncertainty. This is exactly what
Montaigne was doing in his writing about and exercise of the
political life.

The foregoing analysis may not be fully satisfactory to some
readers on the ground that it does not arrive at a fixed and
determinate final result.[41] One of the conclusions of this analysis,
however, is that fixed and definitive appraisals simply are not
justified by the evidence. Part of the meaning of skepticism in

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[41] For example, Nakam, *Montaigne et son temps*, betrays a certain discomfort
when writing of Montaigne's "purported [prétendu] skepticism" (p. 89); but then
she goes on to point out that, paradoxically, skepticism becomes a "guarantee of
a profound wisdom" in Montaigne's hands, and admits that it applies "to the fields
of morals, religion, and politics" (p. 149).

Montaigne's version of it seems to be that human beings are not capable of certain knowledge about themselves and the world. This chapter and the preceding one have offered a reading of Montaigne and the influence of ancient skepticism on early modern political thought that is intended to reflect that spirit.

Throughout the discussion above, we have seen that Montaigne's politics is best characterized as a politics of human fallibility, of movement and process, of custom, and of good judgment in the absence of knowledge. If other labels must be used, they should always be prefixed by the word "skeptical."

CHAPTER SIX

# HUME'S PHILOSOPHY OF CUSTOM

Much of Montaigne's work can be taken as an implicit criticism of the doctrines of the scholastic philosophers who preceded him, but he did not confront them overtly and systematically. Thus, perhaps wrongly, he is usually characterized as an essayist and rarely treated as a philosopher. Hume, on the other hand, drew very self-consciously on the philosophers that preceded him. He wrote to Michael Ramsay that to understand "the metaphysical Parts" of his work his friend would have to read Malebranche, Berkeley, Bayle, and Descartes.[1] He saw himself in the tradition of Locke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Butler, who had "begun to put the science of man on a new footing".[2] Hume's imbeddedness in the tradition of early modern philosophy allows us to explore the implications for political thought of a far more elaborate and philosophical skeptical apparatus than in Montaigne's case.

The precise meaning of Hume's philosophical endeavors has been subject to at least as many conflicting interpretations as we have seen in the case of the ancient skeptics in chapters two and three, and of Montaigne's politics in chapter five. The interpretation advanced here will draw on a number of them, although it cannot possibly take them all into consideration. The interpretation advanced here is that Hume can most profitably be read as a consistent, thorough-going skeptic who drew heavily on the ancient traditions but also modernized and liberalized them in a number of respects. For the purposes of understanding his politics, his philosophy is best characterized as a philosophy of custom.

In this chapter, some of Hume's uses of the ideas of the metaphysicians are outlined, noting the elements of skepticism and naturalism that he drew from the philosophers mentioned above.

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[1] This letter can be found in Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*, p. 291.

[2] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. Selby-Bigge and Nidditch, second edition, p. xvii. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text, with the letter "T" to indicate the *Treatise*.

Then the role of custom and habit in his epistemology and philosophical psychology is explored, bringing out possible sources in work on the "science of man" to which Hume sought to contribute. Following that, some of the ways in which his work was consistent and inconsistent with varieties of ancient skepticism are explored. Finally, in order to understand Hume's view of how custom functions in politics, attention is drawn to his theory of general rules as a way of controlling our habits and customs. The next chapter explores two vocabularies for the understanding and evaluation of the role of custom in politics that Hume relied on as a way of explaining how we live with skepticism.

### 1. *Hume and the metaphysicians: skepticism and naturalism*

Hume used the terms "habit" and "custom" virtually interchangeably,[3] and he used them to fashion a way of living with skepticism, a substitute for occasionalism (the theory that God acts continually in the world) and blind faith, and the basis for a philosophy of man. Descartes, Malebranche, Bayle, and Berkeley had each raised the spectre of skepticism, and each had given his own answer. Hume was not satisfied with any of those answers, but drew on them in developing his own.

Descartes is famous for raising the extreme possibility that God could be deceiving us concerning our reason or senses, a skeptical argument that the ancient skeptics had not considered.[4] As an answer, Descartes started with reason. In the famous formulation, his reason told him that if "I think, therefore I am". But reason did not tell him everything he needed to know: something was needed to assure him that "those ideas which appear to me to proceed from certain objects that are outside me... [are] similar to these objects", and reason could not do it. But nature can: "I am taught this lesson by nature" (160). And nature, Descartes writes, is nothing other "than either God himself or else the order and disposition which God has established in created things" (192). The ultimate answer

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[3] In his usage, the terms do not carry the contemporary association of "habit" with the individual and "custom" with the social.

[4] Descartes, *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (1641), First meditation. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text, with the page number in *The Philosophical Works*, eds. Haldane and Ross, vol. 1.

to the possibility that God could be deceiving us is a dogmatic argument that "God is in no wise a deceiver" (199).

Malebranche's answer to skepticism of the senses was also a doctrine of nature and of God. "Natural judgments" are formed in us "by God according to the laws concerning the union of the soul and body".[5] These natural judgments are forced upon us but fortunately they "tend to preserve our life" (46-7, cf. 647). Malebranche also relied on occasionalism: "God must unceasingly act in us" (47).

Bayle sniffed out the skeptical implications of occasionalism. Once continual "creation was supposed, it was just as easy for God to create a new soul at every moment as it was to reproduce the same soul", and our senses would not be able to tell the difference.[6] Only faith could "give us a legitimate certainty that we have the identical soul today that we had yesterday" (204). The others relied on faith only to establish that God existed; Bayle knew he had to rely on faith to establish how he worked.

Berkeley concluded that the materialists or "Matter philosophers" such as Hobbes and the Epicureans were at the "very root of Scepticism" because they held that we "see only the appearances, and not the real qualities of things".[7] His answer was what is now called idealism, or the doctrine that all real beings are either spirits (God and human beings) or ideas (98). By making the appearances real, there was no need for real qualities behind them, and thus no ground for skeptical doubt. Like Descartes and Malebranche, Berkeley turned to laws of nature to explain human survival: we learn them "by experience", and they give us "a sort of foresight, which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life" (72-3). And these laws of nature are, in turn, provided by God: the "Mind we depend on [God] excites in us the ideas of Sense" (72).

Of the foregoing philosophers, Bayle's work amounted to an ac-

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[5] Malebranche, *De la Recherche de la Verité* (1684); cited from the translation of the 1712 edition by Lennon and Olscamp in Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, p. 46. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text.

[6] Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697); cited from the translation of the 1740 edition by Popkin in Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, p. 204. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text.

[7] Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710); cited from *Berkeley's Philosophical Writings*, ed. Armstrong, pp. 68, 96-7. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text.

ceptance of skepticism coupled with a turn to fideism. Hume was a
Bayle without the faith, and consequently with a need for an alter-
native way of living with skepticism. The others insisted that
appeals to nature and God could refute skepticism, although many
of their readers thought that they ended up as skeptics in spite of
themselves. Hume was not prepared to accept the explanatory power
of dogmatic references to God. The only alternative was to expand
on his predecessors' conceptions of nature. This led him beyond
Bayle and previous skeptics to develop his own theory of nature.

Hume was more explicit than Bayle in labelling his own work
skepticism. According to the *Abstract*, "the philosophy contained in
this book [the *Treatise*] is very sceptical, and tends to give us a
notion of the imperfections and narrow limitations of human under-
standing".[8] In the *Treatise* Hume often identified with the skeptics
by writing that a "true sceptic" will do this or that, that we should
"not forget our scepticism", and that dogmatism "can become no
body, and a sceptic still less" (e.g. T270-4). Although the 1742
essay "The Sceptic" was not ostensibly in Hume's own voice, its
length compared to its sister essays on "The Platonist", "The
Stoic", and "The Epicurean" and the sympathy with which it was
written betray his partiality.[9] In the first *Enquiry*, Hume provided
a "sceptical solution" to the "sceptical doubts" that he raised.[10]
Many of the original sceptical arguments from the *Treatise* reappear
in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, revised in the last
year of his life.

Hume made an effort to distinguish exactly what kind of skep-
ticism he was promoting. In the *Treatise*, he wrote that "true phil-

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[8] *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. Keynes and Sraffa, p. 24.
Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text, with the letter "A" to indicate the
*Abstract*. Keynes and Sraffa believed that Hume wrote this work. Recently, Nelson
has cast further doubt on that claim, and suggested Adam Smith as possible author,
in "The Authorship of the Abstract Revisited". For present purposes, the *Abstract*
is either reasonable evidence of Hume's own intentions or of sympathetic contemp-
orary reception.

[9] For further justification of the use of this essay to interpret Hume, see Robert
Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature*, pp. 117ff.

[10] Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the
Principles of Morals*, eds. Selby-Bigge and Nidditch, third edition, sections iv and
v. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text, with the letter "E" to indicate the
first *Enquiry*.

osophers" maintain a "moderate scepticism" (T224), although he often excoriated "extreme sceptics" as a "fantastic sect" (e.g. T183, 228). In the first *Enquiry*, he recommended a "mitigated scepticism" as opposed to "excessive scepticism", and identified the former with "academical philosophy" and the latter with "Pyrrhonism" (E161; cf. 41). We shall return to the question of the accuracy of these characterizations below.

Hume's chief arguments for skepticism fall into two categories, which he described in the *Treatise* as skepticism of reason and skepticism of the senses. He derived skepticism of reason from probability theory.[11] Demonstrative reasoning, he argued, "degenerates into probability", and probability degenerates into a "total extinction of belief and evidence". This confirmed Hume's famous argument that "all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv'd from nothing but custom" (T180-3). Skepticism of the senses, in turn, derives from the inability of the senses to "give rise to the notion of the continu'd existence of their objects" (T188).

Hume never denies the philosophical force of the skeptical arguments. But he is quick to agree that no one lives in accordance with full skepticism of reason or of the senses, if that means refusing to believe anything. In both cases, "nature breaks the force of all sceptical arguments in time" (T187). This turn to nature is the basis for Hume's way of living with skepticism. The *Abstract* asserts that "Philosophy would render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it" (24). Man's nature is to live by custom, not by skeptical reasonings.

Descartes, Malebranche, and Berkeley had argued in the tradition of Pascal that nature confutes skepticism.[12] Bayle had seen that it does not, but had confided his life to fideism. What Hume did was to strip the dogmatic references to God from the "nature" of the former writers and show that what was left was what enables us to live with skepticism, not refute it. Skepticism is a "malady, which can never be radically cur'd", he wrote (T218). So his project was in effect a return to and elaboration of the skeptical rule of living according to nature as reported by Sextus. His philosophy was a

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[11] For background, see Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England*.

[12] Pascal, *Pensées* in *Oeuvres*, ed. Brunschvicg, vol. 14, #434.

blend of naturalism and skepticism.[13]

Building on the remedies of Descartes and Bayle, Hume wrote that natural "carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy" to the malady of skepticism (T218). "Whatever may be the reader's opinion at this present moment [of skeptical reflection]... an hour hence he will be persuaded that there is both an external and internal world" (T218). Nature will not permit an extreme skepticism. "Whoever has taken the pains to refute the cavils of this total scepticism, has really disputed without an antagonist" (T183). Describing his own experience, Hume writes: "I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and make merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours' amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther" (T269).

For Hume as for Descartes and Malebranche, what nature does for us is beyond our control. "Nature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel", Hume writes (T183). Judgment is "a faculty, which nature has antecedently implanted in the mind, and render'd unavoidable" (T183). Belief is a sentiment "which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure. It must be excited by nature" (E48).

For Hume as for Berkeley, the regularity and order of nature facilitates our survival. Our recognition of causation depends on such regularity. It would be possible to imagine a world where such regularity does not exist, and in the *Abstract* we read that "'tis possible the course of nature may change" (A15). But we probably could not survive in such an irregular world, or if nature changed.

Without the saving power of nature, skeptical reasoning would "totally destroy... human reason" (T187). The skeptic "still continues to reason and believe, even tho' he asserts, that he cannot defend his reason by reason... [and] he must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho' he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity. Nature has not left this to his choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings" (T187).

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[13] This is in accord with Popkin, *High Road*, p. 132n. and Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism*, among others who believe that Hume was both a naturalist and a skeptic.

It is "nature herself" that carries the skeptic along (T269). And the skeptic is justified in going along because the true skeptic is skeptical even of skeptical reasonings. "Blind submission" to the "current of nature" shows "most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles", Hume writes (T269). As he puts it in the *Enquiry*, "Nature will always maintain her rights, and prevail in the end over any abstract reasoning" (E41).

Hume was satisfied with a desacralized nature, and did not feel compelled, like his predecessors, to resort to God as an explicans. But how does nature control us, if there is no God behind it? That is the role that Hume assigned to custom and habit. We shall explore this element of Hume's epistemology and philosophical psychology in the following section.

## 2. *The new science of man: custom and habit in Hume's epistemology and philosophical psychology*

The philosophers that Hume described as putting "the science of man on a new footing" also provided Hume with grist for his own mill. In addition to the foregoing metaphysicians, Locke and Butler are likely sources of elements of Hume's skeptical epistemology and philosophical psychology.[14] They emphasized the role of custom and habit in life and knowledge, and these were to form the basis for Hume's epistemology and philosophical psychology. Hume's work can profitably be read as a philosophy of man as a habit- or custom-forming animal.

### A. *Locke and Butler on custom and habit*
Locke's discussion of skepticism of the senses makes several arguments that we are familiar with from Descartes and Malebranche. He sets forth a number of defenses of the senses based on cases of the absence of sense organs, the distinctness of sensory perceptions, pain and pleasure, and the mutual confirmation of different senses.[15] In the final analysis he admits that it is possible to argue that the evidence of our senses is nothing "but the series and deluding appearances of a long Dream" (634). But for Locke the

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[14] We shall return to Mandeville and Shaftesbury in the following chapter.

[15] Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689), ed. Nidditch, pp. 632-3. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text.

possibility that we are living in one long dream does not really affect our lives. Whether or not we are dreaming, most of us will not put our hands into furnaces or refrain from eating and drinking, Locke writes (635-6). Locke just did not take skepticism to heart.[16]

If Locke supplied no further answer to skepticism, there was another element in his writings that could have supplied Hume with what he needed. The place of custom and habit in Locke's writings was not systematic or philosophical, but its ubiquity casts it as a possible inspiration of Hume's focus on it. From his early writings, Locke had a healthy respect for the power of custom.[17] In the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Locke continually reverts to the origin of ideas in "customs and manner of life" (432-3). Almost always, custom is conceived as a negative influence.[18] "Education, Custom, and the constant din of their Party" are the foundations of "the greatest, I had almost said, of all the errors in the World" (400-1). It is not too much to call their influence "madness" (395). "'Tis not easy for the Mind to put off those confused Notions and Prejudices it has imbibed from Custom, Inadvertancy, and common Conversation" (180). Locke even called custom "a greater power than Nature" (82), and observed that the customs of fashion and opinion are stronger than divine and civil law in some respects (357).

Locke's remark that "no body can, in earnest, be so sceptical, as to be uncertain of the Existence of those Things which he sees and feels" (631) could have inspired Hume's similar remarks. But cus-

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[16] It was not that Locke thought that the skeptical arguments had no purchase, but that they did not matter. The "certainty of Things existing in rerum Natura, when we have the testimony of our Senses for it, is not only as great as our frame can attend to, but as our Condition needs" (634). Echoing Malebranche, he writes that our senses are suited "to the preservation of us, in whom they are; and accommodated to the use of Life" (634); "Our Business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our Conduct" (46).

[17] See some of the references in Wood, *The Politics of Locke's Philosophy*, pp. 71, 95. In the *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Laslett, p. 219, he noted that "when Fashion Hath once Established, what folly or craft began, Custom makes it Sacred".

[18] Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume*, points out that Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke all thought that custom was unnatural (p. 226-7). I am indebted to this book at a number of other places in this discussion.

tom and habit are not Locke's solution to skepticism, as they are for
Hume, and he provides no doctrine of habit as a part of nature.
Hume's move was to bring together Locke's respect for the power
of custom with a positive evaluation of it, assimilating it to the
doctrines of nature of Descartes, Malebranche, and Berkeley but
shorn of their occasionalism.

Butler turned to the power of custom and habit in defense of rel-
igion. Man is a creature that is capable "of getting a new facility in
any kind of action, and of settled alterations in our temper or char-
acter" through the "power of habits".[19] By "accustoming ourselves
to any course of action, we get an aptness to go on, a facility,
readiness, and often pleasure, in it", he wrote (113). Thus, he
asserted, "moral and religious habits" can improve man's "virtue
and piety" (116). A "constant regard to veracity, justice, and char-
ity, may form distinct habits of these particular virtues" (125).

Unlike Locke, Butler examined the place of habit in the contexts
of epistemology and philosophical psychology. It is worth quoting
one passage at length: "But neither the perception of ideas, nor
knowledge of any sort, are habits; though absolutely necessary to
the forming of them. However, apprehension, reason, memory,
which are the capacities of acquiring knowledge, are greatly
improved by exercise. Whether the word habit is applicable to all
these improvements, and in particular how far the powers of mem-
ory and of habits may be powers of the same nature, I shall not
inquire. But that perceptions come into our minds readily and of
course, by means of their having been there before, seems a thing
of the same sort, as readiness in any particular kind of action,
proceeding from being accustomed to it" (112).

Butler noted that the "progress" of acquisition of a habit "may be
so gradual, as to be imperceptible in its steps." He also admitted
that "it may be hard to explain the faculty, by which we are capable
of habits... But the thing in general, that our nature is formed to
yield, in some such manner as this, to use and exercise, is matter
of certain experience" (113). This was perhaps one of the clearest
expositions of man as a habit-forming animal before Hume.

Hume's response was to generalize Butler's argument and show

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[19] Butler, *The Analogy of Religion* (1736), in *Works*, 1:110-11. Hereinafter
cited in parentheses in the text.

that even knowledge and memory belong in the realm of custom. The "far greatest part of our reasonings, with all our actions and passions, can be deriv'd from nothing but custom and habit", Hume wrote in the *Treatise* (T118). He backed this up with claims that "custom [is] the foundation of all our judgments" (T147), that "belief is an act of the mind arising from custom" (T115), and even that "all reasonings are nothing but the effects of custom" (T149). In case the importance of custom was missed in the *Treatise*, the *Abstract* asserts that "'Tis not, therefore, reason, which is the guide of life, but custom. That alone determines the mind, in all instances, to suppose the future conformable to the past" (16, cf. 19, 24). If, as Hume claims, all action, reasoning, and belief are a function of custom, it follows that all politics takes place within a history of custom. It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance of the role of custom and habit in Hume's philosophy and political thought.

B. *Nature, habits, and repetition*
In Hume's analysis, habit "is nothing but one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin" (T179). We say that animals live by instinct, and reason sets us apart, but "reason is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls", which arises from habit (T179). Custom or habit is irreducible. It is a natural instinct (E47, E108), a "principle of human nature", and the "ultimate principle, which we can assign, of all our con-clusions about experience" (E43). We cannot give "the cause of this cause" (E43). When we have developed habits, "our imagination passes... by a natural transition, which precedes reflection, and cannot be prevented by it" (T147).

Habit or custom supplied the crucial element in Hume's revision of his predecessors' conceptions of the role of nature in human sur-vival. In his hands, it is custom that allows us to take advantage of Berkeley's laws of nature. Descartes's nature teaches us through habits. Malebranche's natural judgments are the effects of custom. Habit is a substitute for Bayle's faith. Hume's philosophy gives Locke's observations on the ubiquity of custom a philosophical foundation, and explains the relationship between knowledge and habit that Butler chose not to explore.

For Hume, custom provides the bridge across the skeptical gap between the mind and bodies. Bringing down to earth the language

of the occasionalists, Hume writes that there "is a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas... [and] Custom is that principle by which this correspondence has been effected" (E54-5). "Custom, then, is the great guide of life. It is the principle alone which renders our experience useful" (E44). It is "necessary to the subsistence of our species" (E55).

Following Malebranche and Locke, Hume agreed that repetition was the key to habit and custom. "I find that an impression, from which, on its first appearance, I can draw no conclusion, may afterwards become the foundation of belief" (T102). We call "every thing CUSTOM, which proceeds from a past repetition, without new reasoning or conclusion" (T102). In fact, Hume tends to use custom and repetition as synonyms (e.g. T117). To say that man is a habit-forming animal is to say that man is an animal that thrives on repetition.

Repetition or custom is the foundation of our ideas of causation, in Hume's analysis. The idea of cause and effect comes from constant conjunction, which is, after all, a form of repetition. It "can never operate upon the mind, but by means of custom, which determines the imagination to make a transition from the idea of one object to that of its usual attendant" (T170).

Custom bestows "a facility in the performance of any action or the conception of any object; and afterwards a tendency or inclination towards it" (T422). It is this movement from repetition to facility to inclination that gives custom the motivating power that it has, in politics as in other fields. "Nothing causes any sentiment to have a greater influence on us than custom, or turns our imagination more storngly to any object" (T556). A "constant perseverance in any course of life produces a strong inclination and tendency to continue for the future" (T133).

## C. *The psychophysiology of custom*

Underlying Hume's theory of the dynamics of custom was a psychophysiology, which can also be traced to his metaphysical forebears. They were all puzzled by the mind-body relationship. Bayle had remarked that "we do not perceive any natural connection between the understanding and the brain" (317). Locke had had his doubts: "Whether the natural cause of these Ideas... be the Motion of his Animal Spirits, I will not determine, how probable soever" (396).

How "Matter should operate on a Spirit, or produce any idea in it, is what no philosopher will pretend to explain", wrote Berkeley (81). This is a challenge that Hume took up.

Malebranche's theory of how the soul moves the body may have inspired Hume. It was heavily psychophysiological. The "soul has the power to determine" the movement of "animal spirits" through the nerves to all parts of the body. "The spirits, entering the muscles, cause them to swell, and consequently to contract them" (107): thus the body moves.[20] This explains "the nature of habits". At first the spirits do not necessarily flow "sufficiently open and free" through their assigned paths (108). But, with practice, "little by little the animal spirits open and smooth these paths by their continual flow, so that in time they find no more resistance. Now it is in this facility the animal spirits have of flowing into the members of our bodies that habits consist" (108).[21]

Sharing the Cartesian understanding of man's dual nature as composed of mind and body, Hume wrote that "belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cognitive part of our natures" (T183). Following Malebranche, he also ventured a psychophysiological explanation of belief in the *Treatise*. Explaining the association of ideas by what he calls an "imaginary dissection of the

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[20] Malebranche did not insist on the literal truth of his explanation: "if the soul does not move the body in this way at all, it must move it in some other way sufficiently similar to it for drawing the consequences we shall infer from it" (108).

Locke, too, gave a mechanical account of custom. "Custom settles habits of Thinking in the Understanding, as well as of Determining in the Will, and of Motions in the Body; all which seems to be but Trains of Motion in the Animal Spirits, which once set a going continue on in the same steps they have been used to, which by often treading are worn into a smooth path, and the Motion in it becomes easy and as it were Natural" (396). Like Malebranche, Locke had some reservations, but at least "this may help us a little to conceive of Intellectual Habits" (396).

[21] Malebranche distinguished bodily habits from mental habits. In "one sense, the memory may pass for a habit. For just as corporeal habits consist in the facility the spirits have acquired for flowing through certain places in our bodies, so memory consists in the traces the same spirits have imprinted upon the brain, which are the causes of our facility in recalling things to ourselves" (108). Images in the mind" are nothing other than the traces the animal spirits make in the brain... [and] we imagine things more strongly in proporition as these traces are deeper and better engraved, and as the animal spirits have passed through them more often and more violently" (134).

brain", he writes that "upon our conception of any idea, the animal spirits run into all contiguous traces and rouze up the other ideas, that are related to it" (T60).

Following Malebranche closely, Hume asserts that "the mind is endow'd with a power of exciting any ideas it pleases; whenever it dispatches the spirits into that region of the brain, in which the idea is plac'd; these spirits always excite the idea, when they run precisely into the proper traces, and rummage that cell, which belongs to the idea" (T61). Still following Malebranche, he notes that "often the animal spirits, falling into the contiguous traces, present other related ideas in lieu of that, which the mind desir'd at first to survey" (T61).[22]

Malebranche had written that habits lead to mistakes, without connecting habits with the survival value of natural judgments (107f.). Locke, as we have seen, generally interpreted custom and habit as pernicious, although he recognized the survival value of our belief in external objects. Descartes did not see habits as part of the nature that teaches us, and Berkeley had no place for them in his doctrine of the laws of nature. Hume brought all of these elements together in his theory of man as a habit-forming animal, giving habit a positive role in human nature.

Hume's psychophysiology serves to emphasize the involuntary or natural aspects of custom and habit, and to ground them in human nature at the most elemental level. Where Hume went beyond Malebranche was in applying Malebranche's theory to solve Berkeley's puzzle. It is not only the case that the mind or soul can move the body, but rather Hume sees a two-way relationship. The mistaken judgments that Malebranche and Hume complain about are cases of the body influencing the mind, forcing images and judgments upon it that it does not want, so to speak. This was evidently an attempt to respond to Berkeley's claim that the body's influence on the mind cannot be explained.

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[22] Throughout the *Treatise*, Hume often talks of "the spirits being diverted from their natural course" or flowing "in their usual channel" (e.g. T185-6). However, talk of "animal spirits" is omitted in the first *Enquiry*, suggesting that Hume realized that he had no experimental evidence for his psychophysiology. But he probably also recognized that he did not need it, since he was really describing something about our experiences of habit and custom, and the psychophysiology amounts to nothing more than speculation about physical correspondences.

So far, from what we have seen we might be led to believe that
once repetition sets a custom or habit under way, nothing could stop
it. Fortunately for mankind, these natural habits favor survival. In
this vision, history is nothing but the path of the deterministic
juggernaut of habit, programmed to benefit survival. But Hume's
theory is not so simple. No matter how strong they may be, customs
and habits are subject to change. In fact, they are in a constant flux:
Hume writes of "continual revolutions of manners and customs"
and "prodigious changes" in "manners, customs, and opinions".[23]
We shall return to this point in our summary of the political
implications of Hume's philosophy of custom, following the next
section on the interpretation of Hume's skepticism in terms of the
Hellenistic traditions.

3. *Hume's philosophy of custom and the varieties of ancient
skepticism*

Now that Hume's philosophy of custom has been introduced, it is
time to examine it for the ways in which it is similar to and
different from ancient Pyrrhonism and Academic skepticism. Some
commentators have called him a Pyrrhonist, some have called him
an Academic skeptic, some have blurred the lines between the two,
and some have denied that he was a skeptic at all.

In an article first published in 1951, Richard Popkin called Hume
a consistent Pyrrhonist, more consistent in fact than Sextus
Empiricus.[24] On this account, Hume accepted the Pyrrhonian cri-
tique of the theoretical foundations of human knowledge, but rather
than agreeing that this would lead to a suspension of belief, Hume
added naturalism, the doctrine that nature required us to believe in
certain things. Popkin characterized this as "a legitimate extension
of the Pyrrhonian principle of living according to nature", but sug-
gested that Hume showed "what the ancient Pyrrhonians never real-
ized--that almost everything we believe is due to nature's guidance
and that our activity commits us to accepting far more than they
expected". Thus, "Hume pointed out that in asking people to

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[23] Hume, *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, ed. Miller, second edition, pp.
246, 97. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text, with the letters "EM" to
indicate the *Essays Moral, etc.*
[24] Popkin, *High Road*, p. 126.

suspend judgment" on questions such as the existence of motion, "the Pyrrhonian may be asking them to do something very unnatural". Rather than achieving tranquillity, "the orthodox Pyrrhonist... will be continually fighting nature in his unnatural effort to retain a suspensive attitude" and will be "desperately trying to resist" dogmatic judgments.[25] Since Hume did not ask people to suspend judgment on such questions, he was more of a naturalist and at the same time a more consistent skeptic than Sextus.

Two points can be raised about this account. First, it is not at all clear that the ancient Pyrrhonians insisted that one should suspend judgment about such matters as the existence of motion for the purposes of daily life. On the one hand, Sextus often points out that what the skeptic suspends judgment about is "things non-evident", as we have seen.[26] On the other, he insists that the skeptics live "a life conformable to the customs of our country... and to our own instinctive feelings".[27] The Pyrrhonians never wrote of the desperation that Popkin mentions, never spoke of fighting nature, and claimed that everything they did came naturally. Hume's consistent Pyrrhonism may well have been virtually the same as Sextus's consistent Pyrrhonism, as far as the foregoing issues are concerned. A reasonable interpretation can hold that Sextus is only asking for suspension of judgment concerning the theoretical question about the non-evident reality behind motion, not for an unnatural suspension of judgment about movement for the purposes of daily life.

The second point is that although it is true that Hume often excoriated the Pyrrhonists as "extreme" skeptics, this may have been nothing more than the customary diversionary tactic to protect his own skepticism. Attacking a caricature of an even more extreme skepticism than one's own has been a time-honored practice among skeptics, with the usual source being Diogenes's report of Pyrrho in danger of falling off of cliffs without the protection of his disciples. Popkin reports that "Hume was trying to show the psychological impossibility of accepting a certain version of Pyrrhonism",[28] but it is by no means clear that that version of Pyrrhonism

[25] Ibid., pp. 126-9.

[26] M VIII 322-5 (Bury, 2:407-9); cf. DL IX 105.

[27] PH I 17 (Bury, 1:13); cf. PH I 23.

[28] Popkin, High Road, p. 129.

was Sextus's version. In 1744-5, 1752, and at other times the "hard Name" of skeptic was raised against Hume in connection with employment possibilities, and he must have known the dangers of the reputation before this, so it is understandable why he would try to divert hostility onto another target.[29]

There should be no doubt that Hume's skepticism was not the Pyrrhonian skepticism of certain extremes that we have explored above in chapter two. His was not a skepticism that would lead one to walk off of cliffs. It was not a skepticism that "would maintain that nothing is honorable or base, or just or unjust", without more, as Book III of the *Treatise* demonstrates.[30] It was not a skepticism that would eschew investigation of "what winds prevail over Greece".[31] Hume recognizes a natural inclination to study the "causes and principle of the phaenomena, which appear in the visible world" (T269-71). But, as we have also seen in chapter two, these forms of Pyrrhonism are either irrational or dogmatic skepticisms, and not the thorough-going skepticism that can be derived from Sextus's texts. There are avatars in Hume of Aenesidemus's tropes[32] and use of arguments from common appearances,[33] and of Sextus's discussion of associative signs, the rules for living, and rhetoric.

Hume *was* concerned with the three Pyrrhonian questions, "how are things by nature?..., what attitude should we adopt towards them?... what will be the outcome for those who have this attitude?".[34] On one plausible interpretation there are no substantial differences between his answers to these questions and those of some of the Pyrrhonians. Hume never claimed that we could know how things were by nature, if "by nature" means something beyond experience. His attitude toward things, like the skeptics', was to suspend judgment about the "real nature" of things and live in accordance with appearances (e.g. T638-9, E162-5). The outcome

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[29] See *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. Greig, 1:57-9, 165.
[30] DL IX 61 (Long and Sedley, 1:13).
[31] DL IX 64 (Long and Sedley, 1:19).
[32] See especially "A Dialogue", reprinted in Hume, *Enquiries*, pp. 324ff., but also elsewhere, throughout his writings. Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism*, comments on Hume's use of the tropes at, e.g., p. 19.
[33] See Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*.
[34] Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 15.18 (Long and Sedley, 1:14).

of living in accordance with his theory should be a certain tranquillity and happiness, much as it was for the ancients: a reconstruction of Hume's version of *ataraxia* could begin from the closing pages of Book I of the *Treatise*, "The Sceptic" (EM177n., 179n.), and the portrait of Hume in Ernest Mossner's *Life*. And a large part of Hume's philosophy can be taken as an extended footnote to Pyrrho's claim that "convention and habit are the basis of everything that men do".[35]

A number of recent commentators have claimed that Hume was closer to the Academic skeptics. John Wright has attacked the notion that Hume was a Pyrrhonian. He insisted that there is no sense of *epoché* and no *ataraxia* in Hume, and pointed out that Hume called his own work a "mitigated scepticism or academical philosophy" (E161).[36] In the foregoing paragraphs it has been suggested that Hume did indeed recommend a sort of *epoché* and *ataraxia*, and that he may have rejected the Pyrrhonist label and adopted the Academic label as a diversionary tactic. It is also possible that from lack of real familiarity with the Pyrrhonist materials, Hume simply misidentified his own work in terms of the Hellenistic schools. But Wright's argument merits further study.

Wright argues for a number of commonalities between Hume and the ancient Academic skeptics, as interpreted by Cicero. One is their common diffidence, in which both claim to accept principles that are not absolutely certain, and another is their common interest in approaching as nearly as possible to the truth (417-8). According to Wright, the positive views in Hume's philosophy are advanced as justified by what Carneades felt was the highest criterion of probability: the "probable, tested, and thoroughly inspected" (421). Hume's view should be classified as a "sceptical realism", he writes, because it recognizes that there is an objective world that our imagination naturally supposes, even if it cannot prove it (408, 426ff.). This serves as the foundation for experimental science, which depends on the supposition of an unperceived necessary connection between events (429).

Our discussion of Academic skepticism in chapter two raises a

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[35] DL IX 61 (Long and Sedley, 1:13).

[36] Wright, "Hume's Academic Scepticism", pp. 415-18; hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text.

number of problems for this account. For one thing, Hume presents a theory or "system or set of opinions" (T272) as his own, and as we have seen, it is by no means clear that Arcesilaus and Carneades ever argued *in propria persona*. Wright's reliance on vague and general language from Cicero's version of Academic philosophy to claim that it justifies a positive program for experimental science thus may commit him to a major distinction between Arcesilaus and Carneades as thorough-going skeptics on the one hand, and Cicero as at least partially dogmatic on the other, which may be a misunderstanding of Cicero.

For another, even granting that there is a sense in which Hume's philosophy qualifies as a sceptical realism, Pyrrhonism may qualify as such in the same sense. The Pyrrhonists never denied the reality behind the phenomena, but rather suspended judgment about knowing anything about it. Hume admits that the "ultimate springs and principles [of the world] are totally shut up from human curiosity and enquiry" (E30). Since this is in effect suspending judgment about knowing that reality, his philosophy can be read as an explanation of how we live according to appearances, rather like the Pyrrhonists' work.

In an earlier variation on the theme, Ezequiel de Olaso listed characteristics of the ancient Pyrrhonists that do not fit Hume. Pyrrhonists neither affirm nor deny, not even probabilistically; they do not doubt; they do not affirm the impossibility of knowing the external world; they are not phenomenalists; they are not impassive nor inactive; they are gregarious, but apolitical; and they have no confidence in ordinary language. The Academics, on the other hand, are probabilists; maintain a "healthy doubt"; reject the knowability of the external world; are phenomenalists; accuse the Pyrrhonists of impassivity and inactivity; vindicate civic values; and rely on ordinary language. Olaso would have us find Hume in the latter camp.[37]

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[37] Olaso, "Otra vez sobre el escepticismo de Hume". David Fate Norton submits a somewhat different list: the Pyrrhonists do not deny appearances; they make no unqualified assertions; they oppose appearances and judgments, pro and contra, in order to create suspension of judgment; they aim for mental tranquillity; they follow practical criteria for action; and they cease not in their search for the truth (*David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician*, p. 257). Norton also concludes that if Hume must be classified in ancient categories, he is

Again, however, Hume did not affirm or deny anything about those springs and principles that are shut up from human enquiry. It is not even clear that he is committed to the ultimate position that such springs or principles are necessarily shut up from us, since he sometimes writes as if he had a doctrine of scientific progress. There are problems with calling the Academics (and even Cicero) probabilists. Hume genuinely doubted of some things but did not doubt of a number of other things. He was not impassive, inactive, nor apolitical, although it is too much to say that he fully affirmed civic values. He had no confidence in the truth value of ordinary language, but that did not mean he was not prepared to rely on it. On too many of these points, the best response to pinning the beliefs of one side or the other on Hume is probably, "yes (or no), but with reservations".

The foregoing remarks have been designed only to cast some doubt on the historical justification of considering Hume's philosophy in only one of the traditions of skepticism, to the exclusion of the other.[38] It may be closer to the truth to suggest that he drew on both traditions, but went beyond both of them. The kernel of truth in the accounts of all of these commentators may be that the big difference between Hume and his ancient predecessors is Hume's elaborate epistemology and philosophical psychology. Even though he is diffident about it, it is an undeniable fact that he went to a great deal of trouble to put it together. To the extent that he constructed elaborate philosophical doctrines, Hume's work represents more of a departure from ancient skepticism than Montaigne's. As Popkin puts it, "Hume requires a theoretical framework in order to distinguish between epistemological Pyrr-

closest to the Academics (pp. 278-9), relying heavily on Charlotte Stough's arguments for constructive doctrines in Carneades in *Greek Scepticism*. As we have seen in chapter two, however, this is no longer the prevailing view about Carneades. In addition, although there is much wisdom in Norton's book, it is not clear that Hume insulates his moral thought from his epistemology in the way that Norton thinks that he does. Another way of looking at it would be to hold that Hume's common sense moralism takes place under the umbrella of his skeptical metaphysics.

[38] This applies to yet another recent contribution to the debate, which weighs in on the Pyrrhonian side: Fieser, "Hume's Pyrrhonism: A Developmental Approach". Fieser does not, however, respond to Olaso's objections or to Wright's article.

honism and one's psychological abilities", and as Wright puts it, "the mitigated scepticism adopted by Hume himself involves a *theory*".[39] Only if Pyrrhonian discussions of signs or common appearances or Academic references to the *eulogon*, the *pithanon*, and the *probabile* are taken as positive doctrines can any such theory be found in the ancient skeptics, and they were certainly not as elaborate as Hume's.

Do Hume's epistemology and philosophical psychology make him a dogmatist? Is this theoretical framework vulnerable to his own skeptical attacks as well? The answer to both questions is "yes", although that does not bother him. With Hume, we have a replay of the ancient paradox that skepticism ultimately undermines itself. We have already seen that he evidently backed off of any reliance on the metaphor of "animal spirits" as descriptive of empirical fact. Hume's skeptical epistemology and philosophical psychology undermined the pretensions of his predecessors to metaphysics and especially to reliance on God, but in classical skeptical fashion, they also ultimately undermined any dogmatic commitment to his own philosophical arguments (e.g. T186-7). That did not disturb him because he was concentrating on the question of how to live in the absence of knowledge. This may require the construction of a dogmatic philosophy, even though that philosophy is later to be kicked away after it has performed its service. In this manner, Hume seems to fall right back into the tradition of Sextus's discussions of the self-referentiality of skepticism.[40]

The self-described "*intense* view" of Hume's epistemological skepticism was that we have no firm knowledge or truth whatsoever (T268). In their absence, he argued that custom was an alternative basis for living in accordance with nature. Paradoxically, the only ultimate justification for belief in his own arguments had to be the same. To be consistent, Hume had to admit that he held his own doctrines only because he had become habituated to them (e.g. T265).

It is an error, however, to think that Hume thought that any habituated belief was as good as any other. In what must have been

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[39] Popkin, *High Road*, p. 130n; Wright, "Hume's Academic Scepticism", p. 411.

[40] E.g., M VIII 481; PH I 206; PH II 188, etc.

his more relaxed view, he asserted that his own philosophy could be defended on the ground that it would "contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge" (T273). In the next section, we shall see that Hume's philosophy provided guidelines which could serve as a therapy for erroneous habits.

## 4. *Bad habits and reform politics*

Too often, it is assumed that a political theory centered around habit and custom will be necessarily quietist and conservative. The basic idea, of course, is that consistent adherence to established customs must militate against progressive change of any kind. As we have already seen, however, for Hume habits and customs were subject to constant change. Even if we wanted to prevent such changes, nature does not permit us to. In his *Natural History of Religion* Hume traced the constant flux in religious customs between monotheism and polytheism. In politics, he observed that "all human governments, particularly those of a mixed frame, are in continual fluctuation".[41]

Amid all these changes, Hume thought that some habits and customs are better than others. This was not because they represented better some truth or knowledge, but because they were more likely to facilitate survival and prosperity. Of course, this also meant that some customs were worse than others. Somewhere in the continuum from the most fundamental customs of trust in reason and the senses to the complex customs of community life, the survival value of customs becomes problematic. For example, property, with its source in custom or habit, leads to an avidity "of acquiring goods and possessions for ourselves and our nearest friends [which] is insatiable, perpetual, universal, and directly destructive of society" (T491-2).[42]

The combination of the changeability of habits with differences in

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[41] Hume, *The History of England*, 5:160; and this sentiment is often repeated in the *History*. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text, with the letter "H" to indicate the *History*.

[42] As Wright puts it in *Sceptical Realism*: "When he applies the experimental method to a study of men's social and political behaviour he dispenses with any assumptions concerning the survival value of their natural psychological processes" (p. 233).

their relative merits raises the question: can human beings control changes in their habits for the better? Hume provides a number of answers to this question.

The most general answer in terms of Hume's philosophical psychology is that new habits can be created by new experiences. As one habit grows stronger through repetition, others may decline from disuse. Sometimes the sources of new habits are obvious; sometimes they come into being, as Hume puts it in another context, by an "alteration of a very minute circumstance, unknown to the spectator" (H6:97).

Hume thinks that new habits can be created deliberately. A man can acquire virtuous principles "by practice" (T479). In "The Sceptic", habit is recommended as a "powerful means of reforming the mind" and the "chief triumph of art and philosophy" is that it "insensibly refines the temper, and it points out to us those dispositions which we should endeavour to attain, by a constant *bent* of mind, and by repeated *habit*" (EM170-1). Education and socialization work by this principle, and governments create habits in people by rewards and punishments.

The key to Hume's analysis of the problem of socially destructive habits is that one kind of custom can be used to correct others. Reason, depending on custom itself, plays a crucial role in the therapeutics of other customs. As Hume puts it in another context, "we ought always to correct the first judgment, deriv'd from the nature of the object, by another deriv'd from the nature of the understanding" (T181). "Reflection" teaches human beings how to control the socially destructive "interested affection [by] the very affection itself, by an alteration of its direction" (T492). Our rules concerning the stability of possession, the transfer of possession by consent, and the performance of promises are a product of such reflection. The habit of philosophy thus provides tools for the criticism of other habits.

All of the artificial virtues that make up political society are products of reflective reason. They comprise the rules of justice (also known as the laws of nature), the laws of nations, and even the duties of chastity and modesty. As Thomas Hearn describes them in a valuable article, they are general rules based on deliberation about prevailing habits, corrective of the destructive effects

of those habits, and directive of behavior into new habits.[43] This set of reflective habits is likely to be better than the set of pre-reflective habits because it is likely to be more conducive to survival and prosperity, Hume thinks.

Hearn's analysis may strike some readers as a bit too narrowly focussed on the techniques of habit. A good counter-balance is provided by Annette Baier's insistence upon the role of judgment in guiding habits.[44] We have already seen above, in the discussion of Montaigne in chapter four, that judgment, understood as the art of decision-making in the absence of truth and knowledge, is a peculiarly appropriate faculty for skeptics.

Most of the constructive elements in Hume's philosophy can be interpreted as a contribution to the promotion of good habits. His "rules by which to judge of causes and effects" (T173) are rules for the creation of new intellectual habits. Book III of Hume's *Treatise* is designed to systematize and regularize our understanding of the rules of political society, rather like the attempt to systematize and regularize the inchoate notion of justice of liberal society by means of "reflective equilibrium" in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Hume's "science of man" as a whole is not merely descriptive and diagnostic, but rather prescriptive and therapeutic. In short, it is an attempt to show human beings how to develop habits and customs that are more in accord with their nature. It is thus best characterized as a contribution to reform politics, rather than as quietist or conservative. We shall return to this point in the following chapter.

## 5. *Conclusion*

In the foregoing chapter, the chief elements of Hume's philosophy have been traced to roots in the work of a number of his predecessors. His own recombination of these elements has been characterized as a skepticism and a naturalism, in which all human activities are a product of habit or custom. Some effort has been made to situate Hume's work in the context of the schools of an-

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[43] Hearn, "'General Rules' in Hume's Treatise", pp. 418-19. Hearn adds a short discussion of the "rules of good breeding" (p.419), which will reappear in the following chapter.

[44] Baier, *Progress of Sentiments*, especially p. 281.

cient skepticism, although perhaps no final determination of the school to which he belongs has been made. It is enough for our purposes that his work carries resonances from one or both of those schools, which enables us to place it in the historical tradition of skepticism in the larger sense.

The upshot of the foregoing chapter is that for Hume, all human endeavor, including political action and political ideas, takes place within a history of custom. What will politics be like in the absence of truths and with nothing to go on but custom? The next chapter explores some of Hume's answers to this question.

CHAPTER SEVEN

# HUME'S POLITICS OF MANNERS AND OPINION

If epistemological skepticism has left us with the conclusion that human action and even human reason are mostly a matter of custom, what kind of politics are we going to have? If we have no firmer basis than this, there can be no politics of religious truth, monarchic or republican principles, or natural law understood as Grotius and Pufendorf did, to mention some of the competing theories of the origin and legitimacy of government in Hume's day.[1] Hume's problem, then, was to come up with an alternative way of understanding and evaluating political phenomena once it is concluded that all human activity is imbedded in custom and habit. Whatever pretensions we may have to revising and reforming our customs and habits, we must recognize that we cannot leave their world. Politics must take place within this world of custom and habit.

A full study of Hume's political thought would make it clear that for him most political issues are a matter of custom. The sense of justice "arises artificially, tho' necessarily from education, and human conventions".[2] Property itself is "a species of cause and effect", which in turn is a product of custom (T506; cf. 115, 118). The present chapter, however, does not attempt to cover all of Hume's political thought. Rather, it focuses on two political vocabularies that have not been given systematic treatment in the scholarship. These vocabularies enabled Hume to understand and evaluate politics in the absence of truths.

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[1] A good deal of the literature has focused on Hume's relation to these political languages. For Hume and *jus natural*, see Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*; on republicanism, see Moore, "Hume's Political Science and the Classical Republican Tradition". Hume unquestionably uses a number of different elements from these traditions, but if Hume's avowed skepticism is taken seriously, he cannot be taken to use them in the same sense that a true believer in those traditions does.

[2] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. Selby-Bigge and Nidditch, second edition, p. 483. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text, with the letter "T" to indicate the *Treatise*.

After Montaigne, later skeptics had drawn a variety of different conclusions about the political implications of skepticism. A century before Hume, Hobbes had concluded that if we have no truth and one opinion is as good as another, and we need to agree in our opinions in order to avoid bloodshed, then we should agree to let a Leviathan regulate our behavior and choose our opinions. At roughly the same time, Pascal had concluded that in the absence of certainty and in order to minimize the risk to our souls we should adopt the policies of the Roman Catholic Church. But Hume made it his business to advance alternatives to the proposals of Hobbes and Pascal.[3]

One of Hume's contemporaries distinguished two types of custom: "Habits of Acting" and "Habits of Thinking".[4] Hume developed a vocabulary for use in understanding each of these kinds of habits in their political contexts. "Habits of Acting" included the customs of social relations, known as "politeness and manners". "Habits of Thinking" included the customs of thinking, known as "opinion and belief", which we use in the absence of knowledge.[5] The first of these vocabularies helped Hume justify his judgments about the types of political regime; defend British commerce against its critics; and explain the roots of historical changes such as the birth and growth of English liberty. The second one enabled him to explore the dynamics of grand movements in history; explain the foundations of governments; and analyze the role of religion in politics.

## 1. The politics of "politeness"

It is "large and polish'd societies" that need governments, Hume writes (T543). The study of history teaches us to "cherish with the greater anxiety that science and civility, which has so close a

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[3] For secondary literature on Hobbes as a skeptic, see note 3 to the Introduction, above. On Pascal, see Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*.

[4] Brown, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*, 1:52.

[5] I owe the suggestion to look at Hume's political thought in the terms of these two vocabularies to J.G.A. Pocock. He treats of these vocabularies in *The Machiavellian Moment* (see his index under "opinion") and *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, chapter 2.

connexion with virtue and humanity", he explains.[6] The ancient Greeks and Romans lacked that "delicacy of breeding, or that polite deference and respect, which civility obliges us either to express or counterfeit towards the persons with whom we converse", he comments.[7] These are only a few examples of a ubiquitous vocabulary in his works that includes words such as "polished" and "politeness", "civility" and "complacence", "good breeding" and "refined manners", on the one hand, and "rude", "rustic", and "savage" on the other.

Why is Hume using this language of "good manners", and where did he get it? What are its political implications? These are some of the questions that will be explored here. The most general answer is that Hume is using this vocabulary to establish goals and appeal to values that will serve to guide politics in the absence of the truths of the Church, the republic, absolute monarchy, or natural law. Accordingly, it is part of a skeptical politics.

The key to this explanation is that for Hume the life of letters was his pleasure and his goal. In a letter of 1734, he wrote that "from my earliest Infancy, I found alwise a strong Inclination to Books & Letters".[8] In his autobiography of 1776, he wrote that "I... was seized very early with a passion for literature, which has been the ruling passion of my life" (EMxxxii-xxxiii). His politics can be interpreted as the politics of a man of letters. It was a justification and defence of the kind of political world in which the man of letters could thrive.[9]

A. *The French and English sources*
The Oxford English Dictionary shows that "agreeable", "politeness", "civility", "manners", "refinement", "cultivated", "rude", "savage" and "rustic" all came from the French. Some of them were

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[6] Hume, *The History of England*, 2:518-9. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text, with the letter "H" to indicate the *History*.

[7] Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Miller, Revised Edition, p. 128. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text, with the letters "EM" to indicate the *Essays Moral, etc.*

[8] Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. Greig, 1:13. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text, with the letter "L" to indicate the *Letters*.

[9] This idea is elaborated in Christensen, *Practicing Enlightenment: Hume and the Formation of a Literary Career*, and Phillipson, *Hume*, chapter two.

borrowed by the English centuries before Hume was writing, but the important nexus seems to be seventeenth century France and the court of Louis XIV. The vocabulary was by no means limited to the court, but it is unlikely that any such language would have been developed to such an extent without the court culture so assidously cultivated by the Sun King.[10] Many French books were translated almost immediately, introducing this vocabulary into the English.[11] English figures such as Shaftesbury, Addison and Steele, and Mandeville appropriated and developed it for their own purposes.[12]

A brief review of the French uses of this language might begin with Saint-Evremond, who praised "Conversation" because it "polisheth the Mind, and makes us delicate and agreeable".[13] In an analysis which would be elaborated by Hume, he wrote that "The only Study in the Courts of Princes is how to please, because a Man makes his Fortune there by being Agreeable. This is the reason why Courtiers are so Polite. On the contrary, in Towns and Republicks where men are forced to take pains to get their Living, the last of their Cares is to please, and this it is that makes them so Clownish".[14]

Jansenists like Pierre Nicole criticized civility as a poor substitute for Christianity. "Tis commonly barė lip-service", wrote Nicole, and "commonly corrupts our judgment".[15] But Nicole also recognized its merits. One of the most influential of his essays was a

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[10] For background, see Magendie, *La Politesse Mondaine et les théories de l'honnêteté, en France au XVIIe siècle, de 1600 a 1660*; Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft*; Chartier, "Civilité", *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich, 1680-1820*, eds. Reichardt, et. al. For the larger background, see Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*.

[11] See the (incomplete) chronologies of French works translated into English in Mackenzie, *Les relations de l'Angleterre et de la France d'Après le vocabulaire*, vol. 2; and see Charlanne, *L'Influence Française en Angleterre au XVIIe siècle*, chapter 3.

[12] See Klein, "The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness"; Klein, "Liberty, Manners, and Politeness in Early Eighteenth-Century England"; and Phillipson, *Hume*, chapter two.

[13] [Charles de Marguetal de Saint-Denis, sieur de Saint-Evremond] *The works of Mr. de St. Evremont*, 1:186. Hume mentions Saint-Evremond in the *Treatise* (T599).

[14] Saint-Evremond, *Works*, 2:426.

[15] Nicole, *Essais de morale*, 1:289-90.

"Tract on the Means of Preserving Peace among Men", which Locke translated. The "science" which teaches us to "avoid giving offence" to others "is a thousand times more useful than all those which men bestow so much time and pains upon", Nicole wrote. In language that prefigures Hume's psychophysiology, he mused that "When we are not convinced by our senses that people like us and have regard for us, it is difficult for our heart to believe it... Now *la civilité* does produce this effect on our senses and through our senses on our minds". The source of the obligation of civility is "the common consent of men, who have agreed to condemn those who offend against it".[16]

La Bruyère's famous work, *The Characters, or the Manners of the Century* of 1688, captured the spirit of the age. "La Bruyère passes the seas, and still maintains his reputation", Hume wrote (E6). "La politesse", La Bruyère observed, "does not always inspire goodness, equality, complacency, gratitude; but at least it gives the appearances, and makes man seem from the outside what he should be inside".[17]

The foregoing is only a brief survey of both the use and the self-conscious theorizing about the language of politeness in late seventeenth century French writers ranging across La Roche-foucauld, the Chevalier de Méré, Bussy-Rabutin, Jacques Esprit, and Pierre d'Ortigue, sieur de Vaumorières, among others. Court writers, alienated noblemen, *hommes de lettres*, bourgeois *arrivistes*, Jansenists, publicists, and other categories of writers each claimed the vocabulary for their own. It is precisely such non-specialist literary, moral, or controversial writings that capture and spread vocabularies of the kind considered here.

Hume need not have obtained the French vocabulary of manners and courtesy only from books, since he also lived in France for various periods. Shortly after his arrival for the first time in 1734, he demonstrated his interest in "politeness" in a letter. He had been told, he wrote, that although the English have more "real Politeness of the Heart, yet the French certainly have a better way of express-

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[16] Nicole, *Essais*, 1:184, 242-3, 239.

[17] La Bruyère, *Les Caractères ou les moeurs de ce siècle*, ed. Garapon, p. 163. A "little attention to having sweet and polished manners can prevent bad impressions"; *la politesse* consists of "a certain attention to making others contented with us and with themselves through our words and manners" (pp. 163-4).

ing it". His own opinion was "just the Contrary, viz that the French
have more real Politeness & the English the better Method of ex-
pressing it" (L1:20).

To explain, Hume wrote, "By real Politeness I mean Softness of
Temper, & a sincere Inclination to oblige and be serviceable". A
good example of the true politeness of the French was that "I have
not yet seen one Quarrel in France, tho' they are everywhere to be
met with in England". Expressions of politeness, on the other hand,
consist of those "outward Deferences and ceremonies, which Cus-
tom has invented, to supply the defect of real Politeness or
Kindness". Although they do not "pass for sincere", they provide
real social benefits (L1:21).

Hume's letter from France contains the seed of a theory of man-
ners that was to influence his political thought in a number of
respects, as we shall see below. Expressions of politeness "please
by their Appearance, & lead the mind by its own Consent & Know-
ledge; into an agreeable Delusion". People "insensibly soften
towards each other in the Practice of these Ceremonies. The Mind
pleases itself by the progress it makes in such trifles, & while it is
so supported makes an easy Transition to something more material",
or social harmony (L1:21).

In the English tradition of the language of politeness, the roots of
a number of Hume's ideas can be found in Shaftesbury and
Mandeville. Shaftesbury argued for a "free censure of manners"
because "refinement in manners, good breeding, and politeness of
every kind come only from the trial and experience of what is
best".[18] Emphasizing the political dimension, Shaftesbury wrote
that "All Politeness is owing to Liberty. We polish one another, and
rub off our Corners and rough Sides by a sort of amicable Colli-
sion. To restrain this, is inevitably to bring a Rust upon mens
Understandings. 'Tis a destroying of Civility, Good Breeding, and
even Charity itself, under the pretence of maintaining it".[19]

Mandeville consolidated the language of manners in defence of
commerce and urban life. Cynically, he defined "Manners and
Good-Breeding" as "a Fashionable Habit, acquir'd by Precept and
Example, of flattering the Pride and Selfishness of others, and

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[18] Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 1:9-10.
[19] Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, 1:64.

concealing our own with Judgment and Dexterity".[20] In a long passage on the "Origin of Politeness", he explained why we have it: "all untaught Men will ever be hateful to one another in Conversation. In order to get along with one another, we must hide our pride behind substitutes which "may be denied to be what they are". "All the Precepts of good Manners throughout the World have the same Tendency, and are no more than the various methods of making ourselves acceptable to others".[21]

Mandeville's position amounted to a defense of the luxury that Christians and civic moralists attacked. Observing that men seek "Strength, Riches, and Politeness", he tried to reconcile them to the "Vices and Inconveniences" that attend them. "Luxury and Politeness ever grew up together, and were never enjoy'd asunder", he wrote.[22] Hume was to expand on this message.

B. *Forms of government, polite manners, and letters*

The influence of Hume's years in France is clear in his essays of 1741 and 1742, especially in his comparisons between the governments of France and England. In Hume's day, France was associated with absolute monarchy and England was considered virtually a republic. Criticism of France was an established manner of expressing republican or Country values, derived from the writings of James Harrington, Algernon Sydney, and others in the seventeenth century. But Hume wrote, "I abhor, that low Practice, so prevalent in England, of speaking with Malignity of France" (L1:194). With his "experimental" knowledge of France, Hume was able to reassess English values, not only purely republican values but all of the values of English "liberty". From the standpoint of a man of letters, France had a lot going for it.

In "Of Civil Liberty" of 1741, Hume observed that letters and liberty were usually but not necessarily inseparable. There was a prominent exception: "the most eminent instance of the flourishing of learning in absolute governments is that of France, which scarcely ever enjoyed any established liberty and yet has carried the arts and sciences as near perfection as any other nation" (EM90-91). In

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[20] Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. Kaye, 1:77; cf. 2:108.
[21] Mandeville, *Fable*, 2:138, 126, 147.
[22] Mandeville, *Fable*, 1:7; 2:147.

"Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences" of 1742 he ob-
served that "it is impossible for the arts and the sciences to arise,
at first, among any people, unless that people enjoy the blessings of
a free government", but "though the only proper nursery of these
noble plants be a free state, yet may they be transplanted into any
government" (EM115, 124). This would account for the case of
France.

In fact, Hume wrote, the arts in particular may flourish better
under a civilized monarchy than under a republic. Elaborating on
Saint-Evremond, he asserted that the difference is that "in a re-
public, the candidates for office must look downwards to gain the
suffrages of the people; in a monarchy they must turn their attention
upwards, to court the good graces and favors of the great"
(EM126). The former must make themselves useful; hence the prac-
titioners of the sciences will be favored. The latter must "render
himself agreeable by his wit, complaisance, or civility" and demon-
strate a "refin'd taste"; hence the practitioners of the polite arts will
be favored (EM 126). Hume's point is that politics and politeness
are mutually dependent.

In the essays, Hume did not spell out an overall preference for
France or Britain. But in his correspondence, especially in the last
decades of his life, he indulged his ire at the Wilkes riots and other
anti-Scottish movements. His preference turned on the relative stan-
ding of the life of letters. "Greater Honour is paid to Letters in
France than in England", he wrote in 1763, and he repeated the
sentiment again and again (L1:415, 417, 436, 497). London was the
home of "factious Barbarians" and "Letters are there held in no
honour", he wrote.[23] Paris, in contrast, was the "Center of Arts,
of Politeness,... [and] good Company", and the French court con-
tained "everything elegant and polite" (L1:375, 343). At one point
Hume was angry enough to "resolve never to set foot on English
Ground" again (L1:491).

In civilized monarchies, "politeness of manners" is encouraged by
"a long train of dependence from the prince to the peasant, which...
is sufficient to beget in everyone an inclination to please his
superiors". Where this happens, and politeness "flourishes, none of

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[23] Hume, *New Letters of David Hume*, ed. Klibansky and Mossner, pp. 76,
131; cf. Hume, *Letters*, 2:11, 134, 186.

the liberal arts will be altogether neglected" (EM 126-7). In literary exchanges with Frenchmen, he wrote, he was confident of civil behavior because a "French gentleman of rank could not fail of politeness" (L1:259).

How can a man who expressed pride in having avoided dependence on "Great Men" throughout his life defend the dependence in monarchies? Hume explained that the "civilized" in "civilized monarchy" means that dependence "is not great enough to render property precarious; or depress the minds of the people" (EM126-7). But the message is clear that he is frankly willing to sacrifice some measure of political independence in return for the polished manners which serve as the foundation for the liberal arts.

The vocabulary of manners that we have been exploring enabled Hume to carry out his revaluation. "The republics of Europe are at present noted for their want of politeness", he wrote. The "good manners of a Swiss civilized in Holland" was a French expression for rusticity, he observed. "The English, in some degree, fall under the same censure", perhaps to the degree that they are a republic. Without an interest in pleasing their superiors, the independent citizens of a republic lack a motive "to assist the natural disposition" to civility (EM 126-7).

Politeness was a standard for the evaluation of ancient politics as well, in Hume's analysis. Among the ancients, Hume wrote, the "scurrility", "vanity", and "common licentiousness and immodesty of their style" in written work suggests that the "arts of conversation" were not perfected (EM127). Even their language, in which "a Roman always named himself before the person to whom, or of whom, he spake", expressed a "want of civility" (EM130). The "illbred custom of the master of the family's eating better bread, or drinking better wine at table, than he afforded his guests, is but an indifferent mark of the civility of those ages" (EM132n.). This was not the kind of sociableness and civility that Hume wanted to see, and if political liberty could not provide what he wanted, he was prepared to look for it in monarchies.

The social role of manners and politeness stands out in all of these discussions. Good manners "render conversation, and the intercourse of minds more easy and agreeable", Hume wrote (EM132). "Civility" and "mutual deference" lead us "to resign our own inclinations to those of our companion, and to curb and conceal that presumption and arrogance so natural to the human mind" (EM126).

Social and political harmony follow. "Wherever nature has given the mind a propensity to any vice, or to any passion disagreeable to others, refined breeding has taught men to throw the biass on the opposite side, and to preserve, in all their behavior, the appearance of sentiments different from those to which they naturally incline" (EM132).[24]

### C. *Politeness and the critique of luxury*

Hume's revaluation of monarchy was not the only function of the vocabulary of manners. In "Of Refinement in the Arts" of 1752, he used the language of politeness to reject the civic humanist critique of luxury and defend commercial society. Following Mandeville, Hume argued that luxury is part and parcel of the spirit of refinement that also brings with it "Laws, order, police, discipline; these can never be carried to any degree of perfection before human reason has refined itself by exercise, and by an application to... commerce and manufacture". The "more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become". "Taste in conversation" and "breeding" lead to "an encrease of humanity, from the very habit of conversing together". "Thus *industry, knowledge*, and *humanity*, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found... to be peculiar to the more polished, and more luxurious ages" (EM271-3).

The language of politeness is an important element in this revaluation of commerce. Now it appears without reference to courts and courtly manners, and has been adapted to eighteenth century British company and conversation, and to "commerce" in the modern sense.

Here are the political implications. In answer to the civic humanists, Hume asserts that "a progress in the arts is rather favorable to liberty". Rich peasants and tradesmen who have acquired property "submit not to slavery". It is an acknowledged truth that the House of Commons is the chief defender of British liberty, and it owes its strength to the wealth of the classes it represents, Hume observes. "How inconsistent then is it to blame so violently

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[24] Luigi Turco, in *Lo scetticismo morale de David Hume*, concludes that with this kind of argument Hume substituted "a sense or taste of morals that is educated in elegant company and by refined letters" for the moral sense of Hutcheson (p. 201). He also describes "good breeding" as "an extraordinary redimensioning of the benevolence of Hutcheson" (p. 192-3).

a refinement in the arts, and to represent it as the bane of liberty and public spirit!", he exclaims (EM277-8).

### D. *The role of manners in history*

Hume's interest in social manners is also reflected in crucial passages in his *History of England*. In the first volume, on the early Stuarts, Hume characterized the rise of absolutism in terms of a "great revolution in manners which happened during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (H5:80). In the Tudor volumes, published later, he explained what this meant. In the days of Queen Elizabeth, the nobility "still supported, in some degree, the ancient magnificence in their hospitality, and in the numbers of their retainers". The Earl of Derby maintained a "family" of 240 servants, and Burleigh "could reckon up twenty gentlemen retainers, who had each a thousand pounds a year". These were substantial men, a force to be reckoned with. A Derby or a Burleigh would exercise "an unlimited ascendant... over those who were maintained at his board" (H4:381-4). This meant that he could bring them into the field to fight.

The queen issued proclamations designed to limit the numbers of retainers, and further weakened the nobles by taking advantage of their hospitality on visits, which put them to great expense. But equally or more important was the fact that "the nobility were, by degrees, acquiring a taste for elegant luxury; and many edifices, in particular, were built by them, neat, large, and sumptuous" (H4:383). The nobles began to put their resources into luxury instead of into retainers.

This meant a "decay of the glorious hospitality of the nation", but it also "promoted arts and industry; while the ancient hospitality was the source of vice, disorder, sedition, and idleness". Hume is reiterating his defense of commerce and luxury. "The habits of luxury dissipated the immense fortunes of the ancient barons; and as the new methods of expense gave subsistence to mechanics and merchants, who lived in an independent manner on the fruits of their own industry, a nobleman... retained only that moderate influence which customers have over tradesmen" (H4:383-4).

The relative decline of the nobles gave the kings the upper hand in much of Europe. Until changes that began in the first of the Stuarts' reign, England followed this pattern. And contrary to the claims of the leaders of the Country party, such as Bolingbroke,

"the manners of the nation were agreeable to the monarchical gov-
ernment which prevailed", Hume asserted. "High pride of family"
was a key to contemporary manners. Money had "not, as yet, been
able to confound all ranks of men". The power that money gives is
"solid and real", and does not depend on ceremony and show, Hume
observed. The "distinctions of birth and title, being more empty and
imaginary", on the other hand, require such formalities, or they
will "soon vanish, upon familiar access and acquaintance". Pride of
family had to be expressed in the "pomp and show" of manners. It
was by a "dignity and stateliness of behavior, that the gentry and
nobility distinguisheed themselves from the common people".
"Much ceremony took place, in the common intercourse of life, and
little familiarity was indulged by the great": they maintained their
power by the customs of politeness. "Ranks" and "distinction"
enforced social subordination (H5:132).

These ceremonies at least had a sort of civilizing influence. In
Scotland, reformers had "banished all rites and ornaments, and even
order of worship" in the pursuit of religious devotion. "The mind,
straining for... extraordinary raptures,... rejecting all exterior aid
of pomp and ceremony, was so occupied in this inward life, that it
fled from every intercourse of society, and from every cheerful
amusement, which could soften or humanize the character". This
had important political implications: a "gloomy and sullen dis-
position established itself among the people; a spirit, obstinate and
dangerous; independent and disorderly; animated equally with a
contempt for authority" (H5:68).

In England, the same manners came to the fore during the Civil
War and the Commonwealth. "No people could undergo a change
more sudden and entire in their manners, than did the English
nation, during this period", Hume wrote. "From tranquillity, con-
cord, submission, sobriety, they passed, in an instant, to a state of
faction, fanaticism, rebellion, and almost phrenzy". In politics, the
transformation of manners was expressed in the "violence of the
English parties": "No social intercourse was maintained between the
parties; no marriages or alliances contracted" (H6:141). Here we
observe the importance that Hume gave to social forms and cere-
monies in political analysis.

The Restoration brought with it a change in manners. "By the
example of Charles II, and the cavaliers, licentiousness and
debauchery became prevalent in the nation. The pleasures of the

table were much pursued. Love was treated more as an appetite, than a passion". Charles was a "model of easy and gentleman-like behaviour" who "improved the politeness of the nation; as much as faction, which, of all things, is most destructive of that virtue, could possible permit. His courtiers were long distinguishable, in England, by their obliging and agreeable manners" (H6:539-40). These changes in manners and politeness made possible changes in politics which brought about the arrival of a much more complete liberty than had been possible under the Commonwealth.

In the later volumes, covering an earlier period, Hume returned to the theme of social customs frequently, especially in appendices on "government and manners". "Manners" was an explanatory category of similar importance to that of laws. It was differences in "laws, language, and manners" that kept the English and French territories of the kings of England from blending into one monarchy (H1:299). Reaffirming what he had said in the essays, Hume insisted that the "rise, progress, perfection, and decline of art and science, are... intimately connected with a narration of civil transactions. The events of no particular period can be fully accounted for, but by considering the degrees of advancement, which men have reached in those particulars" (H2:519).

One final piece of evidence can be cited to indicate that the vocabulary of good manners served Hume as a language of skepticism. One of his last writings was a review of a book by Robert Henry in 1773. Revising that review, where he had written "profane letters", he crossed out "profane" and wrote "polite".[25] For Hume, "polite" was a more refined way of describing the manners of the new, secular, and skeptical society in which he thrived.

## 2. The politics of opinion

In Hume's philosophy, "Habits of Thinking" include opinions, principles, prejudices, beliefs, judgments, and even taste and sentiment. Like the vocabulary of manners, he manipulated this vocabulary in

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[25] Mossner, "Hume as Literary Patron: A Suppressed Review of Robert Henry's History of Great Britain, 1773", p. 382. To follow up on the development of the political implications of the language of politeness in the Scottish Enlightenment during the last third of the eighteenth century, see Dwyer, "Clio and Ethics: Practical Morality in Enlightened Scotland".

order to understand and evaluate politics. Opinion and its associated vocabulary are all that we have, since we have no true knowledge. Accordingly, all of politics takes place within a history of opinion.[26]

At times, Hume uses this vocabulary interchangeably. All of its terms are explained by his philosophical psychology. "Opinion or belief is nothing but a strong and lively idea deriv'd from a present impression related to it", he wrote (T105). Custom organizes these ideas, and affects "the mind in invigorating an idea" (T115). As we have seen, it confers "a facility in the performance of any action or the conception of any object; and afterwards a tendency or inclination towards it " (T422).

At times, Hume distinguishes the terms of this vocabulary. Judgment can refer to the system of perceptions "connected by custom, or if you will, by the relation of cause or effect" (T108). Judgment "peoples the world, and brings us acquaintance with such existences, as by their removal in time and place, lie beyond the reach of the sense and memory" (T108). It gives us many of our political ideas.

Principles are opinions that follow general rules. Hume dedicated a great deal of effort to teaching his readers how to discipline their opinions by the norms of general rules. But he also had to admit that "Parties from principle, especially abstract speculative principles,... are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable phenomenon, that has yet appeared in human affairs" (EM60). Prejudices are principles which "we rashly form to ourselves", and are thus usually pernicious (T146-7).

Hume's politics can also be considered a politics of good taste. "Taste" and "sentiment" sometimes refer clearly to judgment and opinion. At times they may seem to refer only to sensations, but then Hume does not distinguish the two in principle: belief itself is "more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cognitive part of our natures", he writes (T183). Taste and sentiment can affect politics much as the other "Habits of Thinking".

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[26] On the role of opinion in Hume's political thought, see the illuminating but unsystematic discussions in Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy* (see index under "opinion") and Phillipson, *Hume*, pp. 59-60, 82, 99, 108, 112, 138.

A. *The dynamics of opinion in politics*

"Ferment", "clamor", "currents and tides", and "torrents" are some of the words Hume used to describe the functioning of opinion in politics. Opinion has the peculiar property of traveling easily from one individual to the next. "So close and intimate is the correspondence of human souls, that no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser degree", he writes (T592). In fact, "it is almost impossible for us to support any principle or sentiment, against the universal consent of every one". This phenomenon, Hume tells us, is a product of sympathy.

Sympathy may be defined as the transfer of customs from one individual or group to another. The process is simple. We first learn of another's opinion or affection by observing "external signs in the countenance and conversation" of the other, "which convey an idea of it". The "idea is presently converted into an impression and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity" in us as to equal the other person's affection. Since human beings are so much alike, "we never remark any passion or principle in others, of which, in some degree or other, we may not find a parallel in ourselves". This "resemblance must very much contribute to make us enter into the sentiments of others" (T317-8).

The implications for politics of sympathy in the transfer of opinions are legion. For example, Hume favored the dispersion of the people into small groups for the purposes of political decision-making. In small groups, where "they are more susceptible both of reason and of order", the "force of popular currents and tides is, in a great measure, broken" (EM36). And custom itself may provide a solution to the problems created by dangerous movements of opinion: "it is to be hoped, that men, being every day more accustomed to the free discussion of public affairs, will improve in the judgment of them" (EM604).

It was in the *History* that Hume used his theory of the contagion of opinion to its maximum explanatory effect. A "torrent of general inclination and opinion ran so strongly against the court" in 1640 that the king could not hold onto his prerogative (H5:284). The "spirit of mutiny and disaffection" was "communicated from breast to breast" (H5:294). So "strong was the current for popular government in all the three kingdoms, that the most established maxims of policy were every where abandoned" (H5:336-7).

Because it was a "place of general rendezvous and society", the
capital city was a hotbed of contagious opinion (H5:294). It was a
"furious vortex of new principles and opinions" when the country-
side was still at peace (H5:378). The "force of popular currents
over those more numerous associations of mankind... gave, there,
authority to the new principles" (H5:387). Thus Hume explained
what was later to be known as urban public opinion on the basis of
his philosophical psychology.

Popular opinion could swing both ways. Elections for the Restor-
ation Parliament became "one of those popular torrents, where the
most indifferent, or even the most averse, are transported with the
general passion, and zealously adopt the sentiments of the commun-
ity, to which they belong" (H6:135). Later, the Popish Plot became
a "torrent" that "ran too strong to be controuled", and the king
"found it necessary to adopt the popular opinion, before the Par-
liament" (H6:348). "The torrent, indeed, of national prejudices, ran
so high, that no one, without the most imminent danger, durst open-
ly to oppose it; nay scarcely any one, without great force of judg-
ment, could even secretly entertain an opinion contrary to the pre-
vailing sentiments" (H6:347). Under such conditions, the "terror of
each man became the source of terror to another" (H6:333).

All kinds of political figures were influenced by opinion. Royalist
members of Parliament "were driven by momentary gusts or cur-
rents, no less than the populace themselves" (H6:234). The judges
that condemned DeWitt were "either blinded by the same preju-
dices" or did not dare "to oppose the popular torrent" (H6:268-9).
Hume's philosophical psychology is explicit when he recounts the
story of soldiers "seized with the contagion" of sympathy for the six
bishops who petitioned James II (H6:491).

The ebbs and flows of opinion were of special interest to Hume in
his efforts to defend the world of letters from dangerous political
systems. In a great empire like China, "the authority of any teacher,
such as Confucius, was propagated easily from one corner of the
empire to the other [and] none had the courage to resist the torrent
of popular opinion", but in Europe the efforts of intellectual
authorities were checked by the "mutual jealousy" of neighboring
states, with the beneficial result that the "contagion of popular
opinion spreads not so easily" (EM 120-22).

B. *Opinion as the foundation of government*
Before Hume, Hobbes had written that "the world is governed by
opinion", and Pascal had agreed with the ostensible meaning of the
title of an Italian book, *Dell'opinione regina del mondo*.[27] But it
was Sir William Temple who had developed the most articulated
theory of the role of opinion in politics that Hume was likely to
have read. The "force of custom or opinion" is the "true ground and
foundation of all Government", he asserted. He distinguished power
or force from authority, and asserted that power, "arising from
Strength, is always in those that are governed, who are many: But
Authority arising from opinion, is in those that Govern, who are
few".[28] Opinion is stronger than power or arms because it can
inspire a dissatisfied people to overthrow mercenary armies, and
can even subvert the soldiers, he observed.

In one of his first essays, Hume followed Temple when he wrote
that "as force is always on the side of the governed, the governors
have nothing to support them but opinion. It is, therefore, on
opinion only that government is founded". Like Temple, Hume
recognized that a sultan or an emperor may rule the majority of his
subjects by force, "but he must, at least, have led his mamelukes,
or praetorian bands, like men, by their opinion" (EM32-3).

Going beyond Temple, Hume distinguished politically significant
opinion into "two kinds, to wit, opinion of interest, and opinion of
right". Opinion of interest is "the sense of general advantage which
is reaped from government; together with the persuasion that the
particular government, which is established, is equally advantageous
with any other that could easily be settled". Opinion of right further
divides into two kinds, concerning power and property. "Upon these
three opinions, therefore, of public interest, of right to power, and
of right to property, are all governments founded", Hume writes
(EM33-4).

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[27] Hobbes, *Human Nature* and *Elements of Law* in *English Works*, ed.
Molesworth, 4:70; cf. p. 29, and similar discussions in Hobbes's *Leviathan* and
*Behemoth*. Pascal, *Pensées* in *Oeuvres*, ed. Brunschvicg, vol. 13, #82; cf. ##303,
311.
[28] Sir William Temple, *An Essay upon the Original and Nature of Government*,
(1680), ed. Steensma, pp. 54, 73. Gunn, "Public Opinion", mentions other sources
of the idea of the importance of opinion in politics in the writings of Henry
Peacham, John Selden, Mathew Prior, and Barnaby Rich.

I.   Opinion of interest differs from self-interest. Self-interest has
regard to the "expectation of particular rewards", such as pensions
and patronage. The latter can add power to a government, but can-
not give birth to one, simply because no government can reward
everyone individually. Those who are not rewarded must believe
that the government provides "general protection" and "general
advantage" (EM33-4).

In the *Treatise*, Hume had explained that the general interest
people have in government is that it protects property and maintains
"well-being and happiness", and "order and concord" (T544-6). In
his essay of a few years later, he emphasized the importance of
recognition of that interest by public opinion. To say that govern-
ment depends on opinion of interest, and not on interest per se, is
to stress that government is subject to the variability and fallibility
of men's judgments and opinions. When he cites the argument of
one party that "even interest itself, and all human affairs, are
entirely governed by opinion", Hume is surely also expressing his
own view (EM51). In his analysis, the political realm is radically
contingent on the ebbs and flows of opinion of interest.

II.   Opinion of right to power is the origin of authority. It usually
derives from an attachment to an "ancient government, and even to
those names, which have had the sanction of authority" (EM33). It
is "custom" or "long possession" which "gives authority to all the
most establish'd governments of the world without exception". Like
any other custom, authority is based on repetition, "operating
gradually on the minds of men" (T556). Thus, "time and custom
give authority to all forms of government" (T566).

Hume's advice, accordingly, is that a "wise magistrate" will "bear
a reverence to what carries the marks of age" and "adjust his innov-
ations, as much as possible, to the ancient fabric, and preserve
entire the chief pillars and supports of the constitution" (EM512-3).
Legislators "must take mankind as they find them, and cannot pre-
tend to introduce any violent change in their principles and ways of
thinking" (EM260). The advice is Machiavellian, but rooted in
Hume's theory of opinion.

The theory of opinion of right to power is not necessarily
conservative. Custom can retroactively justify changes and new
opinions. When time and custom give authority to a present
government, the mind does not "rest there; but returning back upon

its footsteps, transfers to their predecessors and ancestors that right... The present king of France makes Hugh Capet a more lawful prince than Cromwell; as the establish'd liberty of the Dutch is no inconsiderable apology for their obstinate resistance to Philip the second" (T566-7). The oldest opinion is not always the strongest or best.[29]

In the *History*, Hume recurs to the influence of opinion of right to power at many crucial points. Contradicting Bolingbroke, he wrote that Elizabeth was "the most popular sovereign that ever swayed the sceptre" because "the maxims [of absolute royal authority] of her reign were conformable to the principles of the times, and to the opinion generally entertained with regard to the constitution" (H4:145). "So thoroughly were these principles imbibed by the people, during the reigns of Elizabeth and her predecessors, that opposition to them was regarded as the most flagrant sedition" (H4:368).

The Stuart family owed almost all of its power to opinion of right to power. Its "authority was founded merely on the opinion of the people, influenced by ancient precedent and example. It was not supported, either by money or by force of arms". And the Stuarts' inability to recognize the importance of opinion was one of the causes of their fate. When opinion deserted the second of them, he lost his authority and his life; when it supported the third, he regained his throne; when it deserted the fourth, he lost the throne; and the last of the line (Queen Anne) came in on nothing but

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[29] Too many commentators conclude that Hume's ideas are "conservative" without seeing the many ways in which it can be reformist, liberal, and even radical. See, e.g., Wolin, "Hume and Conservatism", and Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, especially chapter 12. Whelan, in *Order and Artifice*, p. 322, writes that Hume's "conservative outlook... is firmly grounded in his philosophical skepticism". Whelan is probably correct that "Hume the political philosopher is above all a teacher of skepticism" (p.328), but wrong to the extent that he assumes that what skepticism teaches is necessarily conservative. MacIntyre may be closer to the truth when he characterizes Hume's work as "anglicizing subversion" in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, ch. 15, although not every reader will share MacIntyre's fear of it. In *A Progress of Sentiments*, Baier draws attention to a number of ways in which Hume's work is liberal or progressive: he does not insist on the duties of servants to masters and wives to husbands, like most of his contemporaries; and his anti-Christianity was certainly not conservative of contemporary mores (e.g. pp. 256-7, 226).

opinion (H5:128).

III. "A noted author [James Harrington] has made property the foundation of all government; and most of our political writers seem inclined to follow him... This is carrying the matter too far; but still it must be owned, that the opinion of right to property has a great influence in this subject", Hume wrote (EM33-4). He revised Harrington in two ways: by reducing property to one among several factors at the foundation of government, and by treating property under the rubrics of rights and opinion.

Hume's moves enabled him to explain Harrington's failure to account for the Restoration. A "government may endure for ages, though the balance of property do not couincide. This chiefly happens, where any rank or order of the state has acquired a large share in the property; but from the original constitution of the government, has no share in the power. Under what pretence would any individual of that order assume authority in public affairs?" (EM35). Property alone would not justify such authority without support from opinion.

Hume's very definition of property as a "species of cause and effect" makes it a matter of opinion (T506). This emphasizes its dependence on men's beliefs, and its relative independence from the law. It cannot always be settled by legislative fiat. Thus, Hume reasoned, if an agrarian law were instituted men "will soon learn the art... of concealing their possessions" under other people's names, and the prevailing opinion that they have a right to all the property that they can engross would justify it (EM515).

Hume's economic theory also treats property as a matter of opinion. Nothing "can restrain or regulate the love of money, but a sense of honor and virtue", he explained. This has political implications because different governments distribute honors in different ways. "Birth, titles, and place, must be honoured above industry and riches" in monarchies, because "subordination of rank is absolutely necessary" to them. "Commerce, therefore, in my opinion, is apt to decay in absolute governments, not because it is less secure, but because it is less honourable" (EM93). In republics, men work for ever greater wealth, but in monarchies they work until they have saved enough to buy land and retire. The legal status of property may be the same, but different opinions of its value determine different behavior.

## C. *Religious opinion in politics*

Hume says that governments are founded on the three kinds of opinion mentioned above, but he also admits that there is a fourth kind of opinion that acts as a dissolvent of such opinions. Religious opinion was the fly in the ointment, the wrench in the gears, for Hume. "We know not to what length enthusiasm, or other extraordinary movements of the human mind, may transport men, to the neglect of all order and public good", he wrote (EM528-9).

Superstition and enthusiasm were the two "corruptions of true religion" that constituted the vast majority of all manifestations of religion. Superstition is caused by "unaccountable terrors and apprehensions" which are placated by "ceremonies, observances, mortifications, sacrifices, presents", and more. Enthusiasm is an "unaccountable elevation and presumption, arising from prosperous success, from luxuriant health, and from strong spirits, or from a bold and confident disposition", leading to the point that "the inspired person comes to regard himself as a distinguished favourite of the Divinity" (EM73-4).

Superstition favors priestly power and is an enemy to civil liberty; Catholicism was the major example. Enthusiasm despises priests and ceremonies, and encourages the spirit of liberty; Quakers, Independents, and Presbyterians represented various degrees of this phenomenon. Superstition "steals in gradually and insensibly" but eventualy "the priest, having firmly established his authority, becomes the tyrant and disturber of human society, by his endless contention, persecutions, and religious wars". Enthusiasm is "more furious and violent" on its "first rise", but it never really organizes, and soon sinks into "the greatest remissness and coolness in sacred matters" (EM76-8).

Religion, "in most countries, is commonly found to be a very intractable principle". Like other such "principles or prejudices", it can "frequently resist all the authority of the civil magistrate; whose power, being founded on opinion, can never subvert other opinions, equally rooted with that of his title to dominion" (EM40).

It was particularly in the *History* that Hume had to come to grips with currents of religious opinion. Their influence on politics was especially important in English history, and yet they were unpredictable. "It is an observation, suggested by all history... that the religious spirit, when it mingles with faction [i.e. politics], contains in it something supernatural and unaccountable; and that, in its

operations upon society, effects correspond less to their known
causes than is found in any other circumstance of government"
(H5:67).

Religious opinion has the power to "counterbalance... power and
riches, the usual foundations of distinction among men" (H5:251-2).
The "raptures and ecstacies" of the religious sects "bestowed a
character" on the believer that was "in his own eyes... much
superior to what forms and ceremonious institutions could alone
confer" (H5:260). The "extreme zeal for their opinions" of the
sectaries "was well qualified to make proselytes, and to seize the
minds of the ignorant multitude", leading to a revolution that
Charles I could not be faulted for not expecting (H5:285). And not
only the masses could be so carried away: James II's zeal for
Catholicism blinded him to common sense and political reality.

Hume's antipathy for religious interference in politics was clear.
But he had to admit, as an irony of history, that it was responsible
for one of the most beneficial developments in English history.
Despite, or perhaps because of, its irrationality and unpredict-
ability, religious opinion had assisted at the birth of the English
scheme of ordered liberty. The "precious spark of liberty had been
kindled, and was preserved, by the puritans alone; and it was to this
sect, whose principles appear so frivolous and habits so ridiculous,
that the English owe the whole freedom of their constitution"
(H4:145-6). Opposition to royal power under Elizabeth and her
predecessors failed to produce "that public praise and approbation
which can alone support men under such dangers and difficulties as
attend the resistance of tyrannical authority". But in the following
generation "the noble principles of liberty took root, and, spreading
themselves under the shelter of puritanical absurdities, became
fashionable among the people" (H4:368).

If it is true that Hume often wrote of the unpredictability of
religious opinion, he also made great efforts to understand it. He
explained it as a species of custom, a product of his philosophical
psychology. He explored its limits and provided his readers with
rules for avoiding its worst errors. The very reading of his *History*,
for example, would have exposed his readers to repeated express-
ions of skeptical opinions that he might have hoped they would
come to adopt. And as a final observation, granted that Hume could
not explain everything about religious opinion, it is by no means
clear that we can explain much more today.

## 3. *Liberalism and the politics of politeness and opinion*

"'Tis interest which gives the general instinct" to obey a government, Hume writes, "but 'tis custom which gives the particular direction" (T556). It is the same with the rules of property: "That there be a separation or distinction of possessions... is absolutely required by the interests of society... [but] What possessions are assigned to particular persons... is often determined by very frivolous views and considerations" (E309n). Most studies center their attention on the associationist psychology with which Hume explains the rules of obedience and property in the *Treatise*. In this chapter, however, we have explored two vocabularies of custom that Hume uses to describe and evaluate the particular circumstances that provide the context for authority and property. It has been suggested that they provided a skeptical alternative to dogmatic theories of politics.

By way of conclusion, we must ask what the foregoing materials tell us about Hume's relationship to the liberal tradition. In our discussion of politeness we have seen that his preference for France was not monarchism, but rather a preference for the rule of law. His interest in a society safe for the life of letters meant both individualism and limitations on government intrusion into people's lives. The standard of politeness helped justify liberal private property, commerce, and luxury.

In our discussion of opinion, we have seen that Hume accorded the highest respect to the role of public opinion in politics. Suitable to his skepticism, this was not because public opinion expressed any truths or knowledge, but rather because it is all that we have and it will channel our politics whether we want it to or not. Hume's theory of opinion also explained private property. His critique of religious opinion implied something like liberal separation of church and state, and of toleration for different religious views, largely on skeptical grounds.

One obstacle to considering Hume a liberal may be Hume's famous demolition of social contract theory, since liberalism is sometimes associated with social contract theory. The reader will notice, however, that contract theory was not included in our working definition of liberalism in the Introduction. Hume invoked the standard of general public opinion to decide the question as to whether or not people obeyed governments because of a contract, concluding that

"in all questions with regard to morals, as well as criticism, there is really no other standard, by which any controversy can ever be decided" (EM486; cf. T546). Here we observe Hume invoking the liberal standard of public opinion to reject the erstwhile liberal standard of contract theory. He did well to do so, by the rest of the liberal standards, because social contract theory has often been invoked to justify otherwise very illiberal political stances.

The vocabularies of manners and opinion helped Hume situate his political thought in history. When we consider questions of obedience in the context of his explanation of the importance of opinion as a foundation of government, the role of religious opinion, and Hume's revaluation of civilized monarchy, we understand them better. Questions of property are better understood in the context of Hume's treatment of grand changes in history from feudal to commercial society. The vocabularies of manners and opinion provided Hume with a skeptical alternative to the political vocabularies of absolute monarchy, natural law, and classical republicanism.

We shall now turn to Kant's encounter with skepticism.

CHAPTER EIGHT

# SKEPTICISM AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM: THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF KANT'S POLITICS OF PUBLICITY

Immanuel Kant's politics of publicity is fundamentally the politics of a response to the tradition of philosophical skepticism. His calls for "public" enlightenment and "publicity" make up, in modern terms, a politics of intellectual freedom. This politics is deeply grounded in Kant's philosophy, and especially in his *modus vivendi* with skepticism. This chapter is a contribution towards establishing its philosophical foundations and revealing its genealogy in Kant's philosophical development.

The conventional interpretation of Kant's politics derives it largely from his ethics. A problem with this interpretation is that some features of his politics are not derived or explained at any length in those terms by Kant, and thus that we do not have a satisfactory account of their philosophical foundations. Without denying that Kant's purposes are ultimately ethical, this chapter reorients attention away from the deontological Kant of the ethics and towards another aspect of Kant's philosopy that emerges as the foundation of elements of his politics. The principal argument for this reinterpretation is a reading of Kant's politics against the background of his early philosophical development.

A brief review of Kant's politics of publicity begins with "What is Enlightenment?" of 1784, where Kant placed his hopes for progressive enlightenment and better government in a free press and the right of every educated man to criticize the government in print. By the time he wrote *The Conflict of the Faculties* in the 1790s he was forced to narrow this vision in the face of harsher censorship, but he still defended the intellectual freedom of the philosophical faculty as a necessary condition of better politics. In *Toward Perpetual Peace* of 1795 he elevated "publicity", including freedom of the press, into a transcendental principle for judging government policy and international relations. In the following chapter attention is drawn to the political context and strategy of Kant's use of this vocabulary, showing that it is an important part of his political

rhetoric. Its philosophical foundations are explored here.

Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* and his *Critique of Practical Reason* expound his ethics with no direct reference and very little indirect reference to publicity, so there is no clear connection to his politics of publicity here. *The Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, which was his most technical exposition of his views on government, refers to publicity in the definition of public law but does not elaborate on its philosophical foundation.[1] *Toward Perpetual Peace* derives the transcendental principle of publicity in one sentence from the concept of public law (8:381),[2] which in turn may be derived from Kant's ethics. This is enough to make the case that Kant's politics of publicity is rooted in his ethics, but if that were all there is to the matter we could say little more than the bare fact that he asserts that it is derived from his ethics and his notion of legality. But it turns out that there is a much richer lode of Kantian reflection on public debate and publicity which is not in his strictly ethical writings but in another part of his philosophy.

The driving philosophical force behind Kant's interest in publicity, it will be argued here, was the skeptical tradition. A reading of Kant's early notes and lectures reveals that a confrontation with epistemological skepticism in several forms posed Kant's problems. But the skeptical tradition also prescribed its own solution to these problems: the skeptical method, which called for ongoing investigation in the face of uncertainty. Kant adopted that solution, and called for intellectual freedom as a propaedeutic to such ongoing investigations.

To the extent that he takes over the problems and solutions of skeptics, Kant is obviously within the skeptical tradition. It will be argued below that important elements of Kant's philosophy belong

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[1]  Kant, *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (ed. by Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences and later Academies, Berlin, 1900- ), vol. 8, p. 311. Hereafter, citations to Kant appear in parentheses in the text, with the volume number of the standard Academy edition followed by a colon and the page number. See the bibliography for information about the translations which have been used.

[2] A surprising number of studies of Kant's political and legal philosophy make virtually no mention at all of what Kant called the "transcendental principle of public law", i.e. publicity. A recent example is Wolfgang Kersting's *Wohlgeordnete Freiheit: Immanuel Kants Rechts- und Staatsphilosophie*, which mentions it only in footnotes (pp. 294n, 321n).

in this tradition, and that they can be seen as contributions to a modernization and revitalization of the skeptical tradition. But Kant himself denied that he was a skeptic, at least of the most extreme kind, so his philosophy as a whole may not easily be claimed for the skeptical tradition. He argued that he transcended the skeptical tradition by asserting that the skeptical method would eventually lead to certainties. These certainties, however, also require intellectual freedom in Kant's vision, because truth is necessarily communicable and its touchstone is its acceptance by other people. Thus, in both his acceptance and his rejection of skepticism, Kant turns to and relies on intellectual freedom.

One more issue is sometimes raised concerning Kant's philosophy and politics, and that is the difference, if any, between Kant's pre-Critical and Critical philosophies. The history of Kant's concern with skepticism traced below will indicate that there is a great deal of continuity between Kant's attitudes towards the skeptics in his pre-Critical and Critical days. That does not prove that there is no difference between the two philosophies, but rather supports the argument that the Critical philosophy was developed in order to solve questions posed in the pre-Critical days by skepticism. The political writings which draw on elements of the Critical philosophy in calling for public intellectual freedom and publicity are thus very much part of the Critical program.

In a larger sense, this chapter is an exploration of one set of the implications of skepticism for political thought. Attention shall be drawn to this heritage in concluding remarks.

## 1. *The challenge of skepticism*

Skepticism concerned Kant from the beginning of his career. His notes from the 1750's, published after his death in the *Reflexionen zur Logik*, reveal an interest in "Pyrrhonian and Academic doubt". They allude to skeptical doubt of the senses and rejection of "dogmata". The "division of opinions", an intimation of what Kant was later to term the "antinomies", is already credited as a cause of skepticism (16:457).

Kant's sources among the ancient skeptics were substantially those that we have. Well-known histories of philosophy canvassed the materials as well, and may have been Kant's chief source. Among the moderns, Kant was certainly aware of the skeptical implications

of the work of Descartes, Malebranche, and Berkeley. Student notes
from his lectures in the early 1770s, the *Logik Blomberg* and *Logik
Phillippi*, record references to Bayle, Voltaire, and especially
Hume. Skepticism was the subject of a lively contemporary liter-
ature in French, Latin, and German,[3] and interest in the subject
was high among Kant's friends: he dedicated *The Conflict of the
Faculties* in 1798 to Carl Friedrich Stäudlin, whose *The History and
Spirit of Skepticism* of 1794 placed Kant at the end of the skeptical
tradition.[4] So it is not surprising that Kant took skepticism
seriously.

Kant's own declarations are enough of an authority for the asser-
tion that his philosophy was developed as a response to skepticism.
In a famous passage in the *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*
of 1783, Kant wrote: "I openly confess that a point made by David
Hume was the very thing which many years ago first interrupted my
dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of spec-
ulative philosophy a quite new direction" (4:260). The point in
question was Hume's skeptical analysis of causation.

Hume on causation was not the only skeptical argument that con-
cerned Kant. Another was the standard argument for idealism based
on skepticism of the senses. Characteristically, Kant expressed it as
an argument for skepticism of reason. It "still remains a scandal to
philsophy and to human reason in general that the existence of
things outside us... must be accepted merely on faith, and that if
anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to
counter his doubts by an satisfactory proof", he wrote in the Pre-
face to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Bxl).

Still another form of skeptical argument, at least as important as
the foregoing, was the "antinomies", a series of conflicting argu-
ments about the nature of the world. The first was that the world
had a beginning in time, and has a limit in space, set against the
antithesis that it does not. The second was that simple parts exist,

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[3] The indispensable guide here is Giorgio Tonelli, "Kant und die antiken
Skeptiker". Tonelli's scholarship is very useful, but in my opinion he understates
Kant's debt to and affinity with the skeptical tradition, especially in the last sections
of his article. This is partly explained by Tonelli's focus on traditional philosophy
and lack of attention to elements of the noumenal realm, such as politics.

[4] I have discussed this work and Kant's place in it in "Kant in the History of
Scepticism".

and that they do not. The third was that freedom exists, and that it does not. The fourth was that there is a God, and that there is not. These antinomies raise the "scandal of an ostensible contradiction of reason with itself" (12:255).

## 2. *The skeptical method*

The foregoing, then, were the problems Kant set out to solve, and he described his method as the "skeptical method". We shall proceed to examine what he meant.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant disparaged skeptics as "a species of nomads, despising all settled modes of life" (Aix). Skepticism, he wrote, "makes short work with all metaphysics" (Bxxxvi). It is a "principle of technical and scientific ignorance, which undermines the foundations of all knowledge, and strives in all possible ways to destroy its reliability and steadfastness" (B451). Now, Kant was nothing if not a devotee of the settled mode of life, and the Professor of Logic and Metaphysics could hardly abandon metaphysics to total skepticism. Newtonian science was one of the pillars of his *Weltanschauung*, and pure reason was his special interest. Kant had every reason to take a very dim view of skepticism as expressed in these terms. But Kant also claimed in the first *Critique* to use the "skeptical method" even as he rejected "skepticism" as such (B451, B535). Student notes from his lectures on *Philosophische Enzyklopädie* of the late 1770s show that he was already making a distinction between the "skeptical method" and "skeptical philosophy" before the publication of the *Critique* (29:28). The former term appears in the *Reflexionen* and lectures in German in the early 1770s, and Kant also used the Latin *methodus sceptica*.[5] The *Logik Blomberg* (1771) and the *Logik Phillippi* (1772) provide some background to the distinction. The name "skeptic" is "seen as something hateful", Kant observes, describing

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[5] Weber, *Das Distinktionsverfahren im mittelalterlichen Denken und Kants skeptische Methode*, pp. 84-5, 146-7. Weber suggests that Kant coined the term in Latin, and then translated it into German (pp. 146-7). Weber provides a thorough survey of skeptical method and intimations of skeptical method in all of Kant's early writings, beginning with the 1746 essay on the estimation of living powers, including his published works, notes, letters, and lectures of the 1750s, 1760s, and 1770s, and ending with the first *Critique*.

someone who only seeks to "throw down the most certain truths" (24:211). But this is not the case with "true skepticism", which consists of "exact, careful investigation". Carried out in accordance with true skepticism, the "skeptical method is a genuine investigation of truth" (24:210). Kant even rehabilitates Pyrrho as the founder of true skepticism who counselled doubt only "until one is unshakeably convinced". It was misguided "followers who made of this a categorical doubt, such that everything is uncertain" (24:330; see also 24:313).

There are two kinds of doubt, in Kant's analysis: "a skeptical, inquiring, investigating, testing doubt, or on the other hand a dogmatic, determining, and decisive doubt" (24:212; see also 24:205, 24:214). Kant obviously identifies with the former. In one of the *Bemerkungen*, or loose-leaf notes he left in his copy of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, he writes that "I am by inclination an investigator. I feel the thirst for knowledge and... deep satisfaction after every step forward" (20:44). The legitimacy of considering the inquiring kind to be the true skepticism is supported by the etymology of the word, Kant points out: "this word in Greek means: to inquire, 'Scrutari, investigare, indagare'" (24:209). Socrates was the "point of origin" of the inquiring kind of skepticism, Kant writes, giving it an authoritative genealogy (24:210). In his lectures on *Philosophische Enzyklopädie* he even went so far as to credit the ancient (good) skeptics with anticipating *Kritik*, which became Kant's term for his own philosophy in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (29:28).

The important thing about the inquiring kind of skepticism is that it does not rule out eventually reaching certainty. In the *Logik Blomberg* Kant writes that the right kind of skepticism is "useful" as a "catharticon, the best means of purifying reason", and, most important, is the "way to truth" (24:208; see also 24:210). Kant reaffirmed in his lectures on *Philosophische Enzklopädie* that "we try to find the truth" by means of investigation in accordance with the skeptical method (29:27-8). It was this line of thinking that Kant followed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* when he wrote that the difference between the skeptical method and (bad) skepticism is that the skeptical method "aims at certainty" (B451).

"Dogmatic doubt" was Kant's favourite term in the *Logik Blomberg* for the "wrong" kind of skepticism. It was "dogmatic" because it "threw up all investigation" (24:205). It took for granted

that man could not achieve certainty in anything, and gave up the attempt. Kant identified it with the Academy (24:209). Apparently the doctrine of the New Academy that "all is uncertain, and it is even uncertain that everything is uncertain" grated on him the most: he called it a "purgative of human reason", and asserted that it contradicted itself (24:210, 216). Hume, he believed, belonged in this camp: "he would have been certainly one of the best and most read-worthy authors, if only he had not had such an excessive bent to doubting everything, but had tried to achieve a genuine certainty by means of testing and investigation of knowledge" (24:217).

By tarring the wrong kind of skepticism with the brush of "dogmatism", Kant was using traditional skeptical language for the target of skepticism. In the early lectures on logic he characterized dogmatism as the acceptance "at first glance of any and all judgments without the slightest investigation of what should be accepted and what rejected" and described the "dogmatic spirit" as "wanting to decide everything and yet investigate nothing" (24:159-60, 206, 327). In the first *Critique* he refined this definition of (bad) dogmatism in the terms of his own philosophy as any pretension to certainty "without criticism of reason itself" (Bxxx, B7).

Kant also recognized that one could not reject every "dogmatum", or item of belief: "whoever accepts no 'dogmata' cannot indeed teach any morality" (24:214). Some decisions, some certainties, were necessary. This was the "good" meaning of dogmatism. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant wrote that he was "not opposed to the dogmatic procedure" even as he was opposed to (bad) dogmatism, paralleling his distinction between the skeptical method and (bad) skepticism. Once criticism of reason has taken place, dogmatic procedure leads to "strict proof from sure principles a priori" and meets "the strictest demands of system" (Bxxxv-vi). This was the certainty that Kant wanted from metaphysics, and the skeptical method alone would not provide it.

Kant's distinctions between the skeptical method and skepticism, and between the dogmatic method and dogmatism, are rooted in Kant's understanding of the first *Critique* as a "treatise on method" (Bxxii). He could draw on the skeptical and dogmatic methods without committing himself to wider philosophical implications, he thought. He sought to domesticate them for his own purposes. The outcome was the conclusion that both dogmatism and skepticism were necessary as "steps" on the way to the "fully matured judg-

ment" of "criticism", which was Kant's term for his own phil-
osophy. The first step was dogmatism, accepted only for method-
ological purposes. Skepticism, as the second step, was necessary to
render "our judgment wiser and more circumspect" by raising
doubts about dogmatic assertions. But skepticism "is no dwelling-
place for permanent settlement", Kant wrote. Criticism was a re-
quired third step. It would establish the limits of reason by nec-
essary principles, not merely "by way of conjecture" (B789). It
paved the way for a return to the certainties of crude dogmatism,
but now they were steeled by the fire of skepticism and disciplined
by criticism.

The skeptical method that Kant endorsed consisted largely of the
setting of dogmatic arguments against each other, making a virtue
out of the antinomies. In the lectures on *Philosophische Enzyklo-
pädie*, he described it as "the method of opposition, through which
we try to find the truth" (29:28). In the *Reflexionen zur Logik*, we
read, "The skeptical method is: to set argument against opposite
argument in equal strength" (16:458). The result will be a suspen-
sion of judgment until further investigation is carried out. In the
*Logik Blomberg*, Kant shrewdly notes that this was Hume's pro-
cedure in his political, literary, and economic essays: "He examines
first one side of a matter, searching for all possible reasons in its
favor, and expressing them in the best rhetorical style. Then he
takes the other side, and in a very unbiased manner, eloquently
expresses all arguments against the first position". The problem
with Hume is that he just throws up his hands and "complains about
the uncertainty of all of our knowledge, instead of deciding, and
expressing, which side was right and which was wrong" (24:217).
Kant never doubted that the skeptical method would lead eventually
to truth in many areas.

Thus, Kant endorsed the skeptical method, and even wrote of
skepticism as a necessary step on the way to criticism. He owed sig-
nificant elements of his philosophical vocabulary to the skeptics,
and freely admitted inspiration from their arguments. And yet there
were definite limits to his skepticism. Although he never explicitly
asked the question, "How is reason's criticism of itself possible?",
his answer is clear. Truths about reason were Kant's ultimate cer-
tainties. It is "of the very nature of reason that we should be able
to give an account of all our concepts, opinions, and assertions",
Kant wrote (B642). It is "impossible that this highest tribunal of all

the rights and claims of speculation should itself be the source of deceptions and illusions" (B697).

With this kind of confidence, Kant distanced himself from the skeptics. His answer in "Orientation in Thinking" to charges of skepticism was that his "Critique begins with the establishment of something certain and definite with respect to the scope of our a priori knowledge" (8:143n). This is an important indicator of the limits of Kant's adoption of the skeptical tradition, and there are others. In his philosophy and politics there is no final suspension of judgment (*epochē*), no skeptical tranquillity (*ataraxia*) in the face of doubt, and no life lived simply in conformity with customs.

### 3. *Knowledge and rational belief*

What were the truths of the first *Critique*, and how did they refute the skeptical arguments mentioned earlier? They were truths about reason. First, Kant claims that causation is a necessary element of our experience, and not merely founded in custom. Second, idealism or skepticism of the senses is refuted by Kant's demonstration that "even our inner experience... is possible only on the assumption of outer experience" (B275). Third, Kant shows that the antinomies can be resolved by discovering that both sides of a paired antithesis can be wrong, or both can be right.

Explaining how both sides of the antinomies can be right requires a short excursus into Kant's philosophical apparatus. Kant borrowed the terms "noumena" ("things thought") and "phenomena" ("appearances") from the Greek philosophers (e.g., 24:327). In Kant's writings, "noumena" are always a matter of thought. A noumenon is like "an object to which no assignable intuition whatsoever corresponds...[; like] a concept without an object (*ens rationis*)" (B347). "Phenomena" is a synonym for "appearances" or "objects of possible experience" -- or things as we know them through the senses. But a noumenon and a corresponding phenomenon are not two different things: they are "different relations" of "one and the same [human] event" (B564).[6] Once this is established, the antinomies can be resolved by showing, for example, that phenomenally

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[6] For a further explanation of this rather difficult distinction, see Beck, "Five Concepts of Freedom in Kant", p. 44 and note 26 (with references to further literature).

speaking it cannot be proved that God and freedom exist or that they do not exist (B668-9), but that noumenally speaking as objects of reason (*entia rationis*) they may play a significant role in human thought and action (B564f., 588f.). Thus, God both is and is not, science and ethics can coexist, and the antinomies do not threaten our confidence in reason.

This solution to the antinomies required a distinction between the understanding and reason, and a dualism in "pure" reason. The understanding can obtain scientific knowledge of phenomena. Pure speculative or theoretical reason is also capable of achieving knowledge in critical philosophy, as we have seen above, and in mathematics and physics (Bx). Pure practical reason, on the other hand, concerns noumenal matters, including God, freedom, and the immortality of the soul. It is *not* capable of reaching knowledge in the usual sense about those noumena. But it *is* capable of achieving justified or "moral" belief or faith (B856), or what Kant was later to call practical knowledge (5:103).

At this point, a limitation of Kant's endorsement of the skeptical method becomes important: "it is only for transcendental philosophy that this skeptical method is essential", he writes (B452,; cf. 29:28). "In mathematics its employment would, indeed, be absurd". In experimental science it "may indeed be useful" but "the final means of deciding the dispute... must in the end be supplied by experience" (B452). But with respect to noumena, or "beyond the field of all possible experience", it avoids errors that by definition "can never be detected by means of any experience" (B453). It is an alternative to the experimental method where the latter cannot reach.

This is significant because the important political issues often concern the noumenal. As Kant observed in the first *Critique*, "right" belongs to actions "in themselves", or as noumena (B61). He noted in the second *Critique* that crime and punishment depend on the "free causality" of the noumenal world (5:100). In *The Metaphysical Elements of Justice* he wrote that "if there is to be anything externally yours or mine, we must assume that intelligible possession (*possessio noumenon*) is possible" (6:249). In fact, all matters of political will depend on uncaused causality, or the noumenal; and Kant often characterized his political ideas as regulative, not constitutive, and accordingly not part of the world of science. Thus we cannot have knowledge of them, only rational belief. The skeptical

method is Kant's propaedeutic to such rational beliefs.

## 4. *A limited but revitalized skepticism*

At this point, we are ready for some stock-taking. Kant says that we do have knowledge about (1) reason, mathematics, and physics, and about (2) the phenomena of science. What we don't strictly know anything about are (3) noumena; and the great issues of politics consist of truths of reason plus matters concerning noumena. About the latter we can have only rational beliefs.

This doctrine of rational or moral belief can be interpreted as an acceptance of and contribution to the philosophy of skepticism.[7] The skeptics claimed that they had no knowledge of anything other than phenomena or appearances, and here Kant is agreeing with them with respect to noumena. They had nevertheless maintained that they could go on living by relying on probability or custom. Kant's notion of moral belief is a substitute for probability or custom, giving living with uncertainty a more systematic philosophical foundation. But it remains a basically skeptical stance towards the noumena that make up a substantial part of politics.

Kant insisted that limiting the claim of knowledge to the metatheory of his own critical philosophy and to mathematics, physics, and science did not make him a skeptic. But his claim to definitive knowledge with respect to these matters is always qualified by his insistence that noumena are only subject to moral belief or an alternative kind of knowledge known as practical knowledge. He remains a skeptic with regard to knowledge in the stricter sense about the

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[7] See, in support of this point, Wild, *Philosophische Skepsis*, chapter 3. Kuehn makes a forceful case for treating elements of Kant's philosophy as skepticism in "Kant's Transcendental Deduction: A Limited Defense of Hume", pp. 47-72. Among recent works on Kant's politics, Booth's *Interpreting the World: Kant's Philosophy of History and Politics* recognizes that Kant's philosophy can be read as skepticism (e.g. at pp. 17, 19, 27), but it does not draw the direct political implications. Riley's *Kant's Political Philosophy* has some interesting remarks on skepticism at p. 172, but it does not place them in the concrete context of the skeptical tradition nor relate them to the politics of publicity. Schneewind, "Natural Law, Skepticism, and Methods of Ethics", discusses Kant's "skeptical method" in ethics; but this is not the "skeptical method" of the first *Critique*. Yet another recent author who writes of Kant's skepticism-in-spite-of-himself is Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism.*

noumena underlying the important issues in politics. When he "found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith" (Bxxx), he was also justifying a new, limited, but revitalized form of skepticism.[8]

## 5. Politics "drawn out of skepticism"

Kant taught that David Hume wrote "political articles, essays of literature, and moral, and metaphysical articles, all of which, however, are drawn out of skepticism" (24:217). In his own case, Kant's politics is drawn partly from the truths of reason and partly from the "moral beliefs" that fill the empty space left by his own skepticism about knowledge of noumena. It followed from his analysis of reason, as we have seen, that the skeptical method was necessary with respect to noumena. Thus, the skeptical method is going to be necessary with respect to any conclusion about politics or participation in politics (recall that Kant does not brook a separation between theory and practice) that does not depend strictly on reason. Thus, much of his politics is also "drawn out of skepticism", and we will proceed to see how.

The skeptical method in Kant's hands is rife with political implications, most of them pointing towards intellectual freedom. Already in the Logik Blomberg, he had argued that "there is nothing more harmful for the scholarly world than a general calm and agreement, and peace; at least this hinders in all cases an improvement and increase of erudition". There must be freewheeling debate. Kant drew the political parallel himself: scholarly peace would be "approximately the same as with the English, whose court and subjects stand in such close unity that they are already in danger of having lost all of their freedom" (24:210). He drew the political inference again in the Critique of Pure Reason, suggesting that

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[8] Many of Kant's contemporaries took him for a skeptic, including Thomas Wizenmann, Ernst Platner, "Aenesidemus" Schulze, and Solomon Maimon. Kant described Wizenmann as "a very subtle and clear-headed man" (5:143) and wrote of Maimon "not only that none of my opponents understood me and the main question so well, but that very few possessed so much subtlety for deep investigations" (11:49). These remarks suggest that he did not think that they were too far off base in their characterizations of his work. For introductory accounts of these philosophers, see Beiser, The Fate of Reason.

governments should not "support the despotism of the Schools" but rather "favour the freedom of [his own] criticism" (Bxxx).

The antinomies are a disease, in Kant's analysis, and reason is its own physician, if allowed to treat itself by exercise. "The root of these disturbances, which lies deep in the nature of human reason, must be removed. But how can we do so, unless we give it freedom, nay nourishment, to send out shoots so that it may discover itself to our eyes, and that it may then be entirely destroyed?", Kant asked (B805-6). This is, of course, what Kant set out to do, and is one of the purposes of the intellectual freedom he demands.

In the first *Critique*, political metaphors underlie many discussions of the needs of reason. Kant calls for freedom of inquiry: "Reason depends on this freedom for its very existence. For reason has no dictatorial authority; its verdict is always simply the agreement of free citizens" (B766). Does Kant mean "free citizens" of the intellectual world or "free citizens" in a political sense? It emerges that the philosophical equivalent of an open political life virtually implies a demand for a real open political life. The rule of law, "which limits our freedom solely in order that it may be consistent with the freedom of others and with the common good of all... will carry with it the right to submit openly for discussion the thoughts and doubts with which we find ourselves unable to deal, and to do so without being described as troublesome and dangerous citizens", Kant asserts. He calls this freedom "one of the original rights of reason" (B780).

The skeptical method that Kant endorses can only perform its valuable function when it is free to carry on its own processes. When "the arguments of reason are allowed to oppose one another in unrestricted freedom, something advantageous, and likely to aid in the correction of our judgments, will always accrue", Kant wrote (B535). This was a crucial, but not the only, liberty that reason requires. There "can be no manner of doubt that it is always best to grant reason complete liberty, both of enquiry and of criticism, so that it may not be hindered in attending to its own proper interests". It "will always suffer when outside influences intervene to divert it from its proper path... Allow, therefore, your opponent to speak in the name of reason, and combat him only with weapons of reason", Kant cautioned (B772).

In the political writings, Kant is often explicit about the practical effects of limiting intellectual freedom. From the narrow per-

spective of the rulers, without "rigorous examinations and objec-
tions, the government would not be adequately informed about what
could be to its own advantage or detriment" (7:34; cf. 8:369). From
a more general perspective, the failure to achieve enlightenment
through public intellectual debate means for a whole people to re-
main "in leading strings", in a non-republican polity, and at war;
all of which were the chief targets of Kant's politics.

### 6. *Communicability as a test of truth and belief*

If certainties about reason and rational beliefs about God, freedom,
immortality and politics are possible, how can we recognize them?
Kant's answer to this question came in the form of a theory of
communicability as a test of these truths and beliefs.

Recall that the skeptical method and freedom of inquiry are
supposed to allow reason eventually to find its way to truths. One
of the tests of error during this process is communicability. As Kant
writes, "truth depends upon agreement with the object, and in re-
spect of it the judgments of each and every understanding must
therefore be in agreement with each other (*consentientia uni tertio,
consentiunt inter se*). The touchstone whereby we decide whether
our holding a thing to be true is [justified] conviction or mere
persuasion is therefore external, namely, the possibility of
communicating it and of finding it valid for all human reason"
(B848). This is only a negative test; it raises no more than "a
presumption" that there is an objective common ground for the
judgment (B848). But it throws doubt on any claims that do not
meet this standard: Kant's ironic comment on Herder's flights of
imagination in philosophical history is that because of their
idiosyncratic genius they are "less capable of being communicated"
(8:45).

In his discussion of communication, Kant distinguishes three
degrees of "the holding of a thing to be true": opining, believing,
and knowing. Knowing is reserved for the truths of reason, math-
ematics, and experimental science. They can clearly be commun-
icated by reference to evidence, which serves as the objective
common ground. The more difficult questions are those of trans-
cendental philosophy, concerning noumena such as God, freedom,
immortality, and politics. Opining about noumena is the "mere per-
suasion" that is detected by communication. Believing something

about them is "subjectively sufficient" although "objectively in-
sufficient" (B850). This occurs when the "object" that justifies the
belief is an object of reason or *ens rationis*. At this point, it may
appear that Kant is relying on individual, subjective grounds that
may not apply to everyone. But he goes on to argue that a belief in
the conditions for a moral end may be "sufficient, absolutely and
for everyone, if I know with certainty that no one can have know-
ledge of any other conditions which lead to the proposed end"; this
becomes a "necessary belief" (B852). The "conditions which lead
to the proposed end" are the existence of God, freedom and im-
mortality. Kant's point is that since no one can prove that they do
or do not exist, and we need them as necessary conditions of mor-
ality, we are entitled to them as postulates of morality (B602).

Any conclusions concerning noumena that achieve the status of
necessary belief fall under Kant's dictum that "all knowledge
[strictly speaking, necessary belief], if it concerns an object of mere
reason, can be communicated". Again, this is only a necessary and
not a sufficient condition for rational belief, since communication
can not "compel the most stubborn skepticism to give way". There-
fore, Kant says, "I must not even say 'It is morally certain that
there is a God, etc.', but 'I am morally certain, etc.'" (B857). But
the point is that my moral certainties can be communicated, and in
fact communication is a necessary condition of maintaining my own
conviction. I must submit my beliefs about noumena to the scrutiny
of my fellow human beings. My own reason "recognises no other
judge than that universal human reason in which everyone has his
say" (B780).

Kant explicitly pushed his insistence on the importance of
intersubjective communication in arriving at and testing truth even
further in "Orientation in Thinking" of 1786. It is worth quoting at
length because the political implications are so clear: "Freedom to
think is first opposed by civil restraint. Certainly one may say,
'Freedom to speak or write can be taken from us by a superior
power, but never the freedom to think'. But how much, and how
correctly, would we think if we did not think as it were in common
with others, with whom we mutually communicate! Thus one can
well say that the external power which wrests from man the free-
dom publicly to communicate his thoughts also takes away the free-
dom to think" (8:144). This is a frank recognition of the power of
politics over philosophy and the achievement of truth. In "What is

Enlightenment?", Kant had argued that individuals alone cannot easily enlighten themselves (8:36). Here, he is pressing home the point that we can hardly even think alone.

It was not only in respect to rational beliefs about God, freedom, and immortality that communicability was important, but also in matters of taste. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant called taste a *sensus communis*. It is "the faculty of judging that which makes our feeling in a given representation universally communicable", he wrote (5:296). Taste has its political implications, too.[9] Like rational belief, it is one of the factors that unite men despite the skeptical conclusion that they cannot have knowledge of its subjects. Although the communicability of taste is not a sufficient condition for truth (after all, we can communicate falsehoods), it is through communication and the faculty of judgment that we learn to recognize falsehoods, including political falsehoods.

This matter of communication was so important to Kant that he added a naturalistic argument to his theory of communicability in "Theory and Practice" of 1792. It is the "natural vocation of man to communicate with his fellows", he wrote (8:305). The philosophical underpinning of this claim should be clear by now.

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[9] This connection between taste, judgment, communicability, and politics is pursued at greater length in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Beiner, pp. 40ff. Arendt stresses the importance of publicity and communication in Kant's politics, but she does not draw any strong connection between skepticism and intellectual freedom. Arendt's early "What is Existenz Philosophy?" credits Kant with demolishing the unity of being and thought and thus founding modern philosophy, but she does not relate this to the skeptical tradition, the skeptical method, or Kant's call for intellectual freedom.

In *Political Judgment*, Beiner follows up on Arendt's cues with a more detailed study of the political implications of Kant's theory of taste. But he too-quickly concludes that there is no room in Kant's theory for "mutual discourse" or "public argument and discussion", and asserts that *Perpetual Peace* gives a too-manipulative role to nature (esp. pp. 66-71). But this takes *Perpetual Peace* too seriously as dogma, and not as what Kant intended it to be, precisely a contribution to public debate. Kant's philosophy is full of arguments for the need for public debate, publicity, and the public use of reason. See especially the next chapter of this book.

Paul Guyer's *Kant and the Claims of Taste* explores the importance of universal communicability in Kant's aesthetics, but does not draw the political conclusions. Guyer's *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* shows unusual sensitivity to overlooked concerns of Kant expressed in his early notes and lectures, but still underplays the importance of the skeptical tradition.

Finally, in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, published in 1798 but based on many years of lecture notes, Kant devoted a substantial discussion to the importance of communication. The "loss of a sense for ideas that are common to all (*sensus communis*) and its replacement with a sense for ideas peculiar to ourselves (*sensus privatus*)" is the "general characteristic of *insanity*" [emphasis supplied] (7:219). Kant makes the connection to intellectual freedom and politics clear: "The prohibition of books only on the basis of theoretical opinions is an insult to mankind... In this way we are deprived not of the only but still of the greatest and most useful means of correcting our own thoughts. We are used to making public statements to see if they agree with the understanding of others" (7:219).

Kant observes that such a public interchange is a "subjectively necessary touchstone of the correctness of our judgment" (7:219). This subjective necessity is not underwritten by Kant's categorical imperative and his notion of autonomy, which would make it an objective necessity. We are in the domain of empirical, practical anthropology, but it is no less a necessity for that. Much of life and politics consists of such subjectively necessary factors. Thus, although a philosopher such as Kant may know certain truths through "critique", such truths (along with lesser truths of importance for politics) must still be tested in the real world through communication. The standard of communicability is Kant's philosophical development of the intelectual freedom that is required by the skeptical method.

## 7. Intellectual freedom and politics

In Kant's doctrine, the three great necessary beliefs were God, freedom and the immortality of the soul. But there were also lesser noumenal truths that make up the realm of politics. Kant elaborates on them in T*he Metaphysics of Morals, Toward Perpetual Peace*, and the shorter political writings. A constant theme is that intellectual freedom will lead ineluctably to these truths.

Chief among the lesser truths of politics are the claims that the best form of government is the republic, and that republicanism will lead eventually to perpetual peace. Kant argues that if intellectual freedom obtains, even princes will eventually see the light and begin to govern "in a republican manner" (8:91; cf. 8:86n). Kant

points out that this is just a "provisional duty", because governing
in a republican manner must surely lead to the existence of a real
republic, in substance if not in form (8:91). This was a subversive
doctrine for Kant's day, and it was saying a lot to say that intel-
lectual freedom would lead princes to resign their arbitrary power.

Kant may have been right in certain instances. Goethe blamed the
weakness of the monarchy on the eve of the French Revolution on
changes in public opinion made possible by intellectual freedom that
caused even Louis XVI to "take himself for an abuse".[10] Royal
houses in Britain, Holland, Denmark, and other countries have
managed to resign real power to what are arguably "republics" even
as they kept the trappings of monarchy. Recent developments in
Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have suggested to some that
"republican" politics will inevitably follow in the trail of greater
intellectual freedom. But what answer would Kant have to the
counter-claim that intellectual freedom does not necessarily lead to
republican politics? Part of Kant's answer is to redirect attention to
the means or process, rather than the end of republican politics.
That process, of course, is freedom for the skeptical method, or
intellectual freedom.

The weight of Kant's analysis is on this process, not on the end
state that republicanism would be. He never claims that someday the
ideal will be reached and the skeptical method will no longer be
necessary. Politics and its truths are always described in terms of
process. To take only a small sample of Kant's writings on these
issues, in *The Metaphysics of Morals* he writes that perpetual peace
is an "idea incapable of realisation" that we can only "approach" by
a "continual process", and in *Toward Perpetual Peace* he writes of
an "infinite process of gradual approximation" (6:350, 7:386). In
an important note to *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, he
writes that "constrained by the circumstances", the powers that be
may postpone "republican" reforms "far, very far, into the future"
(6:188n). Thus, Kant stretches out the relevant time-frame for
judgments about the value of intellectual freedom.

What this means is that counter-examples in the short run do not
prove anything about what is possible. As in the case of God,
freedom, and immortality, Kant puts the burden of proof on those

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[10] Goethe, "Paralipomena" to *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, 53:384.

who would argue that intellectual freedom would not lead to republicanism and peace. No one can prove that intellectual freedom will never lead to republican politics in the infinite future, and we can be pretty sure that without it, republican government will not be attained. Since morality requires it, we are obliged to trust in this process. In Kant's terminology, these noumenal ideas are regulative, not constitutive, of our lives, so we must act *as if* intellectual freedom will lead to republicanism and perpetual peace.

In one of his later essays, Kant goes a step further: it is not only with reference to arriving at republicanism that Kant focuses on process. In *The Contest of the Faculties*, Kant writes that even the best republican constitution itself will be "capable of constant progress and development" (7:93). Accordingly, the skeptical method and the process of intellectual freedom are not only means, but an integral part of the end itself.

## 8. *Skepticism in Kantian politics*

In Kant's hands, the politics of publicity and its foundation in a response to--and partial acceptance of--skepticism were certainly not incompatible with a priori ethics and the rights that it implied. Publicity and ethics were both responses to extreme skepticism. Since Kant anchored the "transcendental principle" of publicity in law and thus indirectly in ethics, it is probably best to conceive of his politics of publicity as taking place underneath the umbrella of his ethics. But if he did in this manner shelter publicity under his ethics, the point still stands that the many treatments of skepticism and censorship reviewed above were the occasions on which he expanded on the importance of publicity. Without skepticism and censorship, it seems unlikely that he would have given publicity such a major role in his politics.

The connections between skepticism and intellectual freedom canvassed in this article have a number of wide-reading implications. One is that they require a reinterpretatation of Kant's politics as multi-dimensional, with a philosophical politics of publicity existing alongside the politics drawn more directly out of Kant's ethics. Our discussion reveals that this politics of publicity is independently grounded in the critical philosophy and is not simply the self-interested defence of his own profession by a man whose greatness lay elsewhere. This interpretation cuts against the

prevailing notion that the sublime politics of the categorical imperative are the only truly Kantian politics.

This is important for our understanding of Kant, and also for our understanding of the politics of later Kantians and neo-Kantians. In one line of philosophical development, Charles Sanders Peirce's unlimited community of scientists, Josiah Royce's community of interpretation, George Herbert Mead's universal community of discourse, Ludwig Wittgenstein's rejection of private languages, and Karl-Otto Apel's and Jürgen Habermas's ethics of communication all have explicit roots in, or at least affinities with, Kant's theory of communicability. Our treatment suggests that this strand of philosophical development owes a great deal to the tradition of philosophical skepticism.

In more specifically political theory we have seen that intellectual freedom, an important feature of what was later seen as Kant's "liberalism", is not uniquely derived from his concepts of autonomy and the categorical imperative, but from his confrontation with skepticism. Liberal theory continues to share Kant's interest in intellectual freedom, and again, it should be recognized how much this interest owes to the skeptical tradition.

If you doubt your knowledge--and you should--you have to keep on inquiring and debating with others. This is what Kant learned from skepticism. If you think you have eventually achieved truth, it should be something you can confirm by communicating with others. This is what Kant added to the theory of skepticism. The politics that both of these points implied in Kant's day was clear: intellectual freedom in the forms of the "public use of reason" and "publicity". They made up a politics of the skeptical method and of communication. We shall proceed to see exactly how in the following chapter.

CHAPTER NINE

# THE SUBVERSIVE KANT: THE VOCABULARY OF "PUBLIC" AND "PUBLICITY"

Immanuel Kant is often thought of as a timid philosopher who never dared to defy the political authorities. It is a fact of his career that he apparently meekly submitted to a rebuke from the civil authorities in 1793 and promised never to write on religious matters again. Most of his political works were written in the form of light occasional pieces; none was written as a revolutionary manifesto.

This chapter shows, however, that Kant's writings on politics were indeed subversive. There was a thread of common vocabulary that tied many of them together. That vocabulary, in Kant's day, was clearly associated with attacks on the contemporary political system. While it was by no means entailed by his philosophy, and presumably his politics could have focused on other matters, it was consistent with his *modus vivendi* with skepticism. Kant's contribution, as we have seen in the foregoing chapter, was to give this vocabulary a foundation in his philosophy.

The vocabulary in question here is a complex of terms associated with "public" political life. The first section of this chapter deals with Kant's distinction between "public" and "private", and the second explores what was known as "publicity". A survey of contemporary literature reveals that Kant derived his usage of these terms from the German literary and political writers of his day. He used it against the lawyers to subvert the language of absolutism and to solve problems that the natural lawyers had answered inadequately.

## 1. *Public vs. private*

The famous "What is Enlightenment?" of 1784 was one of Kant's earliest political essays. The key to his message is his stand on the meaning of the terms "public" and "private". The private use of reason "is that which a person may make of it in a particular civil

post or office with which he is entrusted", he writes.[1] In contrast, the public use of reason is a matter of writing and publishing. Kant explains: "by the public use of one's reason I mean that use which anyone may make of it as a *Gelehrter* ["man of learning" or "scholar"] addressing the entire reading public". This is the "public in the truest sense of the word" (8:37).

Kant's use of "public" to refer exclusively to writers and the reading public is striking today, and it would have been in Kant's day, too. We are accustomed to thinking of a career in civil service as part of our "public life", and any writing that we might do evenings and weekends as our own private affair. As many scholars have noticed, Kant turned this meaning around.[2] We shall explore sources for this alternative usage below.

"Public" as a noun in German (*Publicum* or *Publikum*) derived its meaning directly from roots in the Latin which already possessed a dual tradition. On the one side, the Latin *publicus* took its earliest meaning from *populus*, or "the state, as far as it rests on a natural community of human beings", as one modern commentator puts it.[3] But it also meant that which was out in the open, not in one's house, or of general effect or use in society. Thus streets, plazas, the theater, and viaducts were called "public".[4] "Public" as an adjective in German (*öffentlich*), which translates more literally as "open", became associated with *Publicum* through this latter meaning.

Cicero was the first of the Roman lawyers to make a consistent distinction between *ius publicum* (public law) and *ius privatum* (private law) such that the former referred to laws handed down by

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[1] Kant, *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences and later Academies, Berlin, 1900- ), vol. 8, p. 37. Hereinafter, citations to Kant appear in parentheses in the text, with the volume number of the standard Academy edition followed by a colon and the page number. See the bibliography for information about the translations which have been used.

[2] Most scholars, however, merely remark on this unusual usage, perhaps with an exclamation point (e.g. Shell, *The Rights of Reason*, p. 171).

[3] Müllejans, *Publicus und Privatus im Romischen Recht und im älteren Kanonischen Recht*, p. 5.

[4] Hölscher, "Öffentlichkeit" in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur Politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Brunner, Conze, and Koselleck, 4:420. See also, of general relevance for this essay, Hölscher's *Öffentlichkeit und Geheimnis*, esp. pp. 101ff.

the Senate and the latter to private contracts and wills.[5] Following his lead, in the law of the Empire *publicus* often referred to the power of the magistrate, as in *imperium publicum, clementia publica, servus publicus*, and so forth. Magistrates possessed *potestas publica* and were *personae publicae*. Ulpian's definition of public law ran: *publicum ius in sacris, in sacerdotibus, in magistratibus consistit*. But *publicus* still could be applied to anything outside of the house, or of general use, such as *lux publica, dies publica*, and *verba publica*.[6]

In the Middle Ages the wider meaning of "public" as anything out in the open prevailed in Germany. The "fundamental significance of the public element in the legal process was thought to be the bringing of the evil of a misdeed out into the light so that it could be punished," as a modern scholar summarizes it.[7] A trial could be "public" simply because it was out in the open, and it was believed that torture could be relied on to bring secrets out into the open. But increased attention to Roman Law, which had been rediscovered in Italy in the twelfth century and began to receive significant attention in Germany by the fifteenth century, led to a narrowing of the meaning of "public".[8]

In the 1600s the Germans, especially legal writers writing in Latin, began a process which has been described as a narrowing of the meaning of *publicus* and *öffentlich* to *staatlich*, or having to do with the state.[9] In 1614, for example, Johannes Althusius referred to state power and the power of officials as branches of *potestas publica*.[10] The wider meaning of *publicus* as anything outside of the house or out in the open faded. A "public trial" now only meant a trial in a state court. "Public war" had once meant any openly declared and openly pursued war. Now, following Grotius, it came to mean only war between legal sovereigns, whether openly declared and pursued or not.[11]

By the eighteenth century the process of reduction of "public" to

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[5] Müllejans, *Publicus und Privatus*, p. 13.

[6] Hölscher, "Öffentlichkeit", pp. 427, 420.

[7] Hölscher, "Öffentlichkeit", p. 417.

[8] Hölscher, "Öffentlichkeit", pp. 418-19.

[9] Hölscher, "Öffentlichkeit", pp. 422-6.

[10] Hölscher, "Öffentlichkeit", p. 424.

[11] Hölscher, "Öffentlichkeit", p. 423.

"pertaining to the state" had reached a high point among legal writers. Schütz's translation of Grotius in 1707 rendered *aut privatis aut publicis personis* as "either private persons or those who hold public offices [öffentlichen Ämtern]".[12] Zedler's dictionary, in volumes published in the 1740s, defined "public persons" (*öffentliche Personen*) as "in law, the rulers and magistrates, and also others in public offices and public service..." and "the public" (*das Publicum*) as "in law, properly what belongs to the prince or the higher authorities and not to mere private persons".[13] For some writers the concept of the public as pertaining to the state followed state power in reaching out to absorb much of the wider meaning that "public" had once had. In 1762 the jurist Georg Wiesand wrote that *res publicae*, including everything from rivers, forest, and salt licks to light and water, belong to the prince.[14] They were "public" not because they were out in the open or of general use but because the prince claimed to own them.

In view of this conceptual history, one modern commentator calls Kant's usage "a provocative change in the current legal terminology".[15] It is true that it amounts to a clear rejection of these jurists' association of public and prince. But the wider meaning of "public" had not died out entirely, and Kant could draw on other conceptual resources than those of the mainstream of jurisprudence. Zedler was careful to note that princely aggrandizement of the word occurred especially "in law," as we have seen. Some of his definitions retained the wider reference: *öffentliche Güter* are defined as "pertaining to the assembled people or to the whole community," and an *öffentliches Gericht* is one that is intended to promote the general welfare.

But rather than a change in the current legal terminology, Kant's usage is better characterized as a wholesale rejection of the lawyers' usage and acceptance of the usage of the growing number of books and literary periodicals written by "general writers" for "the whole nation," as Friedrich Just Riedel put it in *Letters on the Public* of

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[12] Hölscher, "Öffentlichkeit", p. 426.
[13] Zedler, *Grosses Vollständiges Universal-Lexikon*, see under "*Öffentliche Personen*" and "*das Publikum*".
[14] Hölscher, "Öffentlichkeit", p. 424.
[15] Hölscher, "Öffentlichkeit", p. 445.

1768.[16] They had done the most to recover and extend the association between the "public" and the "people" in a wider sense.

When, in 1725, Gottsched was already appealing to the "public" (*öffentliche*) judgment of his readers in *Die Vernunftigen Tadlerinnen*, he was not appealing to any prince but to women readers.[17] Lessing wrote of his readers as *das Publiko* in his introduction to the *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* of 1759.[18] Friedrich Nicolai's introduction to the first volume of the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* in 1766 was addressed to "lovers of the newest literature... in many cities" as the German *Publici*.[19]

In 1768 Riedel was already complaining that "the word *Publikum* sounds in my ears from all sides," although some listeners do not know what it is and others doubt if it exists. He analyzed suggested meanings of the word which included "the critics," "other authors," "professionals," "youths," and so forth, and concluded that "men and women of taste" made up the real public.[20] Significantly, all of the plausible meanings he examined were elements of the reading public.

The preface to the first issue of Wieland's *Der Deutsche Merkur* in 1773 referred often to the taste and judgment of the entire class of educated men as the *Publikum*.[21] The editors of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, the journal that published Kant's "What is Enlightenment?," had thanked *das Publikum* in anticipation in the introduction to the first issue in January 1783.[22] By November of 1784, after Kant had sent his manuscript to the publisher but before it was published, Schiller explicitly contrasted the prince with the reading public in announcement of *Rheinische Thalia*: "I write as a citizen of the world, who serves no prince. . . . The public [*Das Publikum*] is everything to me, my education, my sovereign, my confi-

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[16] Riedel, *Briefe Über das Publikum*, p. 115.

[17] Gottsched, *Die vernunftige Tadlerinnen*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Reichel, 1:1.

[18] Lessing, *Werke*, ed. Paul Stapf, 2:7.

[19] Nicolai, ed., *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, vol. 1, Preface (no page number).

[20] Riedel, *Briefe*, pp. 12, 113-4.

[21] Wieland, ed., *Der Deutsche Merkur*, vol. 1, Preface (no page number).

[22] Biester and Gedike, eds., *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, vol. 1, Preface (no page number).

dante".[23]

In 1784 the public and freedom of the press had already been the subject of journalistic attention by the time Kant was writing. In April of that year Wilhelm Wekhrlin's *Das graue Ungeheur* celebrated freedom of the press as "the most beautiful present that heaven in its mercy has made to the human race".[24] That same month, several months before Kant sent his article off to the journal, an unsigned article on freedom of the press appeared in volume three of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. It used Frederick's own early writings to support an argument for freedom of the press. Among other points that Kant followed up, it raised the issue of the propriety of an army officer's criticism of his superior's orders. Like the other journals, it appealed to the "judgment of the public".[25]

The authors and journals reviewed above were only a part, if an influential part, of a developing literary tradition associated with reading societies, the stage, published exchanges of letters, and so forth. Many had no intention of promoting political radicalism through their language. But, as one modern commentator observes, mushrooming literary reading societies "opened and widened the space for a public life free from the control of the state and the family".[26] That could not but be subversive to the prevailing absolutism. Kant's language in "What is Enlightenment?" represents a contribution to this movement and probably would not have been conceivable without it.


A. *Liberty to publish for all* Gelehrten

Kant's terminology served to introduce a subversive doctrine. As a "private" military officer, a man must follow orders, Kant concedes. As a "private" citizen (*Bürger*), he must pay taxes, and as a "private" clergyman, he must teach what his church requires. But

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[23] Cited in Hocks and Schmidt, *Literarische und politische Zeitschriften 1789-1805*, p. 18.

[24] Wekhrlin, ed., *Das graue Ungeheur*, 2:196.

[25] "Über Denk- und Drukfreiheit. An Fürsten, Minister, und Schriftsteller", *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 3:327, 326. We now know that this article was written by Ernst Ferdinand Klein: see Hinske and Albrecht, eds., *Was ist Aufklärung?: Beiträge aus der Berlinischen Monatsschrift*, revised edition, p. 517.

[26] Engelsing, *Der Bürger als Leser*, p. 263.

"as a member of a complete commonwealth or even of cosmopolitan society", he may publicly criticize these private responsibilities in writing. For example, as a *"Gelehrter* addressing the real public (i.e., the world at large) through his writings, the clergyman making public use of his reason enjoys unlimited freedom to use his own reason and to speak in his own person" (8:37-8). This is a call for full freedom of the press.

Kant's theory is a "two hats" doctrine in which each individual can play two roles in society. It may have been suggested by a letter to him from Freiherr von Zedlitz, the enlightened Prussian Minister of Education, in 1778. Men "can be judges, advocates, preachers, and physicians only a few hours each day; but in these and all the remainder of the day they are men, and have need of other sciences," he wrote, appealing to Kant to suggest means of bringing this home to university students (10:219). We do not have Kant's answer to von Zedlitz at the time, but "What is Enlightenment?" can be taken as his answer.[27]

The three examples of men who can wear two hats that Kant gives require some explanation. Clergymen and officers were *Beamten*, or civil servants. Like Kant himself, as a professor, they were directly dependent on the prince for their livelihood. *Bürger* translates roughly as "town-dwelling citizen-taxpayer"; the standard example was the merchant. Since there is no good English equivalent, we shall use the German term, which is the same in singular and plural. Unless they lived in one of the free cities, German *Bürger* also had obligations to their prince. According to cameralist theory, their economic activities were a privilege granted by the state, so they, too, were dependent on the prince. Kant's project was to give all of these dependents a sphere of independence.

Kant's choice of examples reflects a shrewd assessment of the roles and needs of the German *Gelehrten*. He does not bother with the court writers, who are hopelessly dependent on their Maecenases. The *freie Schriftsteller* who made their living by their pens did not especially need Kant's help: he remarks only that freedom to express their opinions "applies even more to all others who are not

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[27] Schulz cites two edicts from the Prussian Ministry of Education that also may have inspired Kant's distinction ("Kant und die Berliner Aufklärung", p. 69). However, they did not go as far as Kant in characterizing official sermons as 'private'.

restricted by any official duties" (8:41). It was the bulk of German *Gelehrten*, the middle ground of *Beamten* and *Bürger*, who needed Kant's help. These were the men who ran the prince's state and operated his economy. They were undoubtedly the bulk of Kant's own readers. If they were to function as enlighteners, they would need some measure of independence.

Kant was very generous in his definition of *Gelehrten*. He drew on a respected tradition to the effect that greater liberty could be granted to men of learning as long as their disputes did not seep down to the many. Playing on the prestige and legitimacy of the *Gelehrten*, he extended their privileges to the widest practical circles. If soldiers, clergymen, and *Bürger* all qualify as *Gelehrten*, then hardly any official or male head of an urban household, which is to say hardly any full member of society by eighteenth-century standards, would not qualify. "Everyman a part-time man of learning" would have been a radically leveling slogan in Kant's day.

Most of Kant's discussion in "What is Enlightenment?" focuses on the clergy and matters of religion. He probably felt that this would meet the least opposition from Frederick the Great's censors, and he was probably right. Kant mentions once that the officer should be free to publish observations "on the errors in the military service" and that the *Bürger* should be free to publish "his thoughts on the impropriety or even injustice of... fiscal measures" (8:37-8). He even goes so far as to suggest that Frederick "realizes that there is no danger even to his legislation if he allows his subjects... to put before the public their thoughts on better ways of drawing up laws, even if this entails a forthright criticism of the current legislation" (8:41). For the rest, the principles he established in respect to clergymen would carry over, *mutatis mutandis*, to officers and *Bürger*. But even Kant's one mention each of criticism of the army, taxes, and legislation probably sounded enormous in some quarters.

"What is Enlightenment?" was not the only work in which Kant presented this theory. In 1793 he published a long article in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* under the title "On the Old Saying: That may be True in Theory but it Won't Work in Practice". In that article Kant wrote that subjects of a state had absolutely no right to rebel against their superiors. But the *quid pro quo* for this passivity was that "the citizen must be free to inform the public of his views on whatever in the sovereign decrees appears to him as a wrong against the community, and he must have this freedom with the sov-

ereign's own approval" (8:304).

"Freedom of the pen, within the bounds of respect and affection for the constitution one lives under... is the sole shield of popular rights," Kant asserts. Such freedom also benefits the sovereign: without it, the sovereign would be deprived "of any knowledge of matters which he himself would change if only he knew them. Hence, to limit this freedom would bring him into contradiction with himself" (8:304). But this appeal to the prince's self-interest hardly disguises what he loses by freedom of the press.

B. *Freedom to publish for philosophers*
In "What is Enlightenment?" Kant staked a great deal on the power of a free press to bring about enlightenment. However, things got worse for the reading and writing public. Frederick died in 1786, and with his death came a new king, a religious mystic totally opposed to enlightenment. In 1788 Frederick William II asserted in a cabinet order that "press freedom has degenerated into press impudence, and the book censors have fallen completely asleep". He became convinced that the "licentiousness of the so-called *Aufklärer*, who think themselves superior to everything," was a threat to the state.[28] His new minister, Wöllner, issued an Edict on Religion in 1788 that guaranteed freedom of conscience for the Prussian subject "so long as he keeps any peculiar opinion to himself and carefully guards himself from spreading it or per-suading others", and a new, tougher censorship edict followed.[29]

A few years later, Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* ran afoul of the king and his minister. Kant managed to circumvent the theological censor in Berlin by obtaining approval from the philosophical faculty at Jena; but this ploy was trans-parent, and Wöllner issued a stern warning to Kant, threatening "unpleasant measures" (7:6). Kant wrote to Frederick William

[28] Cited in Kiesel and Münch, *Gesellschaft und Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert*, p. 123.
[29] Gregor, "Translator's Introduction" to *The Strife of the Faculties*, pp. ix-x. This is an appropriate place to point out that many accounts of Kant's attitude toward the public, including Jürgen Habermas's otherwise valuable discussion in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, treat "What is Enlightenment?" and *The Conflict of the Faculties* as if they present the same theory, neglecting the differences between these works, and the reasons for them.

promising not to write on religion again. This letter was published in the Preface to *The Conflict of the Faculties* of 1798, after Frederick William's death.

In the letter Kant claimed a much narrower privilege for the interchange of ideas than he did in "What is Enlightenment?". He begins with the classic disclaimer that the argument of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* was "not at all suitable for the public; to them it is an unintelligible, closed book, only a debate among scholars of the faculty [*Facultät-Gelehrten*] of which the people take no notice". It will cause no harm. But the university faculties must remain free "to judge it publicly", Kant asserts, attempting to retain his subversive use of the word "public" (7:8).

The clergymen that Kant had championed as part-time men of learning are now disenfranchised. Those "who are appointed to teach the people (in the schools and from the pulpits)... are bound to uphold whatever outcome of the debate the crown sanctions for them to expound publicly; for they cannot think out their own religious belief by themselves, but can only have it handed down to them... by the competent faculties (of theology and philosophy)". Already the language is changing: it is not the written product of their evening reflections but their official duties that qualify as "public". The strategy is obviously that of the sacrificial lamb: "Accordingly I censured the temerity of raising objections and doubts, in the schools and the pulpits and in popular writings, about the theoretical teachings of the Bible and the mysteries these contain (for in the faculties this must be permitted)" (7:8-9).

At this point it is clear that Kant is reverting to the narrower definition of *Gelehrten* as scholars. *The Conflict of the Faculties* begins with a distinction between "scholars proper" and "intelligentsia" (*Litteraten*). The latter "are instruments of the government" who may "be called the men of affairs or technicians of learning. As tools of the government (clergymen, magistrates, and physicians) they... are not free to make public use of their learning as they see fit" (7:18). The divorce of prince and public is gone, and in its place there is a distinction between the "civil community", subject to government supervision, and a narrowly construed "learned community". The privileges of free debate are reserved for the latter (7:34).

Kant makes further use of the traditional division of the four faculties of the university into three "higher" faculties (theology,

law, and medicine) and one "lower" faculty (philosophy). The "higher" faculties are distinguished from the "lower" by virtue of the government's interest in their teachings, Kant writes. "Now the government is interested primarily in means for securing the strongest and most lasting influence on the people, and the subjects which the higher faculties teach are just such means. Accordingly, the government reserves the right itself to sanction the teachings of the higher faculties, but those of the lower faculty it leaves up to the scholars' reason". Although it sanctions the teachings of the higher faculties, Kant clarifies, the government does not have any interest in intervening in "scholarly discussions" or "the teachings and views that the faculties, as theorists, have to settle with one another" (7:19, 34). A new "two hats" theory emerges for the scholars of the higher faculties: they have to teach what they are told, but they can debate freely among themselves.

The philosophy faculty, however, can claim full freedom. It has "the public presentation of truth as its function" and "must be conceived as free and subject only to laws given by reason, not by government" (7:33, 27). But lest this sound too ambitious, Kant supplies mitigating considerations. The people as a whole will not pay any attention to the arcana of philosophy, "agreeing that these subtleties are not their affair". The reading public of the philosophers is evidently composed of only the government and the higher faculties, who must "put up with the objections and doubts" that the philosophers bring forward (7:29, 28). The philosophers' communication with the larger public is mediated by the higher faculties. New doctrines will only reach the people as a whole through the higher faculties, with the government's sanction.

Kant appeals directly to the prince's interests for freedom for philosophers. By definition, he argues, the truth cannot be established by command, and the government cannot control the philosophers "without acting against its own proper and essential purpose". Indeed, the government must rely on the philosophy faculty to expose errors espoused by the other faculties. Without the philosophy faculty's "rigorous examinations and objections, the government would not be adequately informed about what could be to its own advantage or detriment" (7:27, 34).

On the one hand, Kant characterizes the higher faculties as potential tyrants. Were it not for philosophers, the other faculties "could rest undisturbed in possession of what they have once occu-

pied, by whatever title, and rule over it despotically". The "businessmen of the higher faculties" will set themselves up as "miracle-workers", offering panaceas to the public and obtaining the "passive surrender" of the public, "unless the philosophy faculty is allowed to counteract them publicly" (7:28, 31). This appeal to the public harks back to the theory of "What is Enlightenment?".

But on the other hand, in case the princes are not entirely unsympathetic to the potential despotism of the higher faculties as long as they control them, Kant also characterizes the higher faculties as potential Jacobins. The "government cannot be completely indifferent to the truth of" the teachings that it authorizes. The doctrines of the higher faculties can "stir up political struggles" and sow "the seeds of insurrection and factions". Without philosophical oversight, "self-appointed tribunes of the people... can steer the judgment of the people in whatever direction they please... and so win them away from the influence of a legitimate government" (7:32, 35).

Kant's hopes for the effects of freedom of the press among university scholars and especially philosophers reaffirm his hopes in "What is Enlightenment?" even if the scale of participation is reduced. Progressive improvement can be expected: "the higher faculties (themselves better instructed [by philosophers]) will lead... [government] officials more and more onto the way of truth". A "constant progress of both ranks of the faculties toward greater perfection... [will] prepare the way for the government to remove all restrictions that its will has put on freedom of public judgment". Political effects will follow: "the government may find the freedom of the philosophy faculty, and the increased insight gained from this freedom, a better means for achieving its ends that its own absolute authority" (7:29, 35). Political freedom will follow freedom of the press for philosophers.

## C. *Philosophers as advisors to rulers*

*Toward Perpetual Peace*, which appeared in 1795 after the bulk of Part One of *Conflict* was written but before it was published, also called for a special public role for philosophers. It consisted of proposed preliminary and definitive "articles for a perpetual peace among nations". In a supplement a "secret article" asserts that "The maxims of the philosophers on the conditions under which public peace is possible shall be consulted by states which are armed for war" (8:368). To put it less awkwardly, rulers should consult phil-

osophers on matters of war and peace.

This is a secret article, Kant writes, because rulers might think it beneath their dignity to consult mere subjects about such important matters. The ironic humor of the need for a "secret" article in the midst of a philosophy of publicness should not be lost on the reader. It is an implicit criticism of princely vanity.

This article can remain "secret," according to Kant, because all that rulers have to do is allow philosophers "to speak freely and publicly... and they will indeed do so of their own accord if no one forbids their discussions" (8:369). The rulers do not have to publicly admit to requesting the philosophers' advice; they can simply overhear--or read--the philosophers' discussions.

The reason why the ruler should allow the philosopher to speak publicly is the standard one of self-interest: the philosophers "throw light on their affairs". As in *Conflict*, Kant disparages the tendency of the higher faculties of law, theology, and medicine to use their worldly power to interfere with philosophy. No danger should be expected from allowing the philosophers to speak freely because they are "by nature incapable of forming seditious factions or clubs" (8:369).

## 2. *German 'publicity'*

Another term that was closely related to "public" was also growing in importance in Germany in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Writers of the *Aufklärung*, enthusiastic about the potential for enlightenment in the process of communication with the literate public, termed that process "publicity" (*Publicität*). This was not what we understand by "publicity" in the twentieth century; it was concerned only with merchandising ideas. It was closely related to *Publizistik*, another relatively new term which translates best as "political journalism". "Publicity" was the medium of political journalism.

Zedler's dictionary, published in the 1740s, did not even have an entry for the word; but in April of 1784, several months before Kant wrote "What is Enlightenment?", Wilhelm Wekhrlin was using the term in his periodical, *Das graue Ungeheur*. It was a function of freedom of the press. Wekhrlin wrote: "What must it have been like in the times before printing presses existed! Tyrants had no bridles, the people no refuge. Vice could grow impudent, without

becoming red with shame. Virtue knew no means of sharing its suffering, or gaining the sympathy of society. The laws had no critics, morals had no supervisor, reason was monopolized. Providence spoke: let the human race become free! And 'publicity' appeared."[30]

"Publicity" would "bring the abuse of power before the judgment seat of the public", Wehrlin asserted. Writers are "born advocates for mankind". They are the "natural organ of public righteousness"; one cannot expect *Beamten*, "for whom injustices are profitable, to take great pains against them", he argued. And as for criticism of "publicity" from the authorities, "it is not books which corrupt human society, but actions". Wehrlin was proud of the power of "publicity": the "so-called writing craze [*Schriftstellerey*] is the reason why the judgment of the public has such overwhelming power today", he wrote.[31] He later referred to himself as a "priest of publicity".[32]

Kant's correspondent and friend, Johann Erich Biester, one of the editors of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, often wrote of the role of his periodical in "publicity". "Candidness was ever its character; the spread of freedom of thought... was its goal; the undoing of the chains of untruth, the recovery of the right to one's own investigations and one's own thinking were often, in different disguises, its object", he wrote. "Publicity" was its "chief aim".[33]

In 1785, a year after Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" appeared, August Ludwig von Schlözer's *Letters to Eichstädt in Vindication of Publicity* hailed writers as "unpaid servant[s] of civil society" and "advisor[s] to the nation".[34] A minor poet, Eulogius Schneider, went so far as to write a "Hymn to Publicity".[35] "Publicity" as a liberating ideal reached a high point in Freiherr von Knigge's 1792 work, *Josephs von Wurmbrand*, written in the first flush of elation at the success of the French Revolution. Publicity

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[30] Wehrlin, *Ungeheur*, 2:124.

[31] Wehrlin, *Ungeheur*, 2:195, 190, 192, 195, 123.

[32] Cited in Wilke, *Literarische Zeitschriften des 18. Jahrhunderts (1688-1789)*, p. 156.

[33] Hinske and Albrecht, eds., *Was ist Aufklärung?*, pp. 318ff.

[34] Cited in Jäger, *Politische Kategorien in Poetik und Rhetorik der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts*, p. 19.

[35] Jäger, *Politische Kategorien*, p. 69.

will bring the misuse of power and the subterfuges of the powerful "before the judgment seat of the public, of the whole people", he wrote, echoing Wekhrlin.[36]

Among other probable sources of the term for Kant, Schlözer, already mentioned above, published *Allgemeine StatsRecht und StatsVerfassungsLere [General Public Law and Constitutional Law]*, a textbook on politics, in 1793. In it he argued that reforms in Germany would have to include the legalization of "publicity", since without it "no community spirit, and no trust of the people in their representatives, is thinkable". In another connection he described the work of the periodical that he published as "general publicity". Like Kant, Schlözer gave a great deal of credit to the freedom of the press that made "publicity"--communication with the"public"--possible. Like Kant, he argued that the freedom "to think aloud" benefits the ruler. But unlike Kant, he approved of a right to resistance against usurpers and tyrants: in such cases "pure appeals to the public seldom help".[37]

The reaction to the French Revolution in Germany was profound and far-reaching, and often enough writers and "publicity" were blamed for social and political unrest. Johann Georg Heinzmann published an *Appeal to my Nation: Concerning the Pestilence of German Literature* in 1795, and included Kant and Kantianism among the radicals responsible for such unrest. "The truly enlight-ened public," he wrote, "among whom true virtue, true morals [or manners], and highmindedness reigns, is certainly not the so-called reading public".[38] But Heinzmann was swimming against the stream of belle-lettristic and political writers of his times, while Kant had made their language his own.

"Publicity" was an important element in Kant's *Toward Perpetual Peace* of 1795. Where the foregoing writers had meant no more

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[36] Knigge, *Josephs von Wurmbrand... politisches Glaubenbekenntniss...*, ed. Steiner, p. 94. It is worth noting that the entries for the English word "publicist" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggest that the word was borrowed from the German about this time. The earliest uses noted are from Burke in 1792 and Henry Crabb Robinson in 1801, both referring explicitly to German affairs.

[37] Schlözer, *Allgemeines StatsRecht und StatsVerfassungsLere*, pp. 165, 189, 153-4, 173, 200, 108, 106.

[38] Heinzmann, *Appell an meine Nation: Über die Pest der deutschen Literatur*, p. 53.

than that the term implied communication with the public, Kant supplied a philosophical dimension. "Publicity" was the "formal attribute" of public right (or public law), he wrote (8:381).

"Publicity" is required by public law for conceptual reasons. Justice, Kant writes, "can only be conceived of as publicly knowable". Since law or right "can only come from justice," law or right must accordingly be publicly knowable. This is a "readily applicable criterion which can be discovered a priori within reason itself" (8:381).

Following the pattern of his works on morality, Kant articulated two "transcendental" principles of public right. "All actions affecting the rights of other human beings are wrong if their maxim is not compatible with publicity" is the negative formula. "Like any axiom, it is valid without demonstration", Kant asserts. If public admission of a maxim immediately stirs up opposition, that must be because "it is itself unjust and thus constitutes a threat to everyone", Kant argues. On the other hand, the affirmative formula is that "all maxims which require publicity if they are not to fail in their purpose can be reconciled both with right and with politics" (8:381, 386). Kant is saying that virtually by definition any purposes or actions which can be carried out only with full disclosure and public support are going to be legitimate.

Kant uses the principle of publicity to decide contested issues like the right to rebellion, the binding effect of treaties, the justification of preemptive strikes, and the rights of strong countries. In each of these cases he takes a question that had been debated by natural lawyers in other terms and uses the principle he has borrowed from the language of political writers, "publicity," to resolve it. In each case he believes he is elaborating a systematic politics of reason, in contrast to the undisciplined compromises of the natural lawyers.

Kant's predecessors in the natural law tradition had generally opposed the right of rebellion but recognized a handful of exceptions. Grotius had recognized seven exceptions to the prohibition of rebellion, ranging from cases in which a ruler seeks to destroy his people to cases where the ruler shares power with a senate and tries to infringe the senate's power.[39] Pufendorf admitted five of

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[39] Grotius, *Of War and Peace*, trans. Barksdale, Section I.LXXII.

these cases.[40] Wolff distinguished rebellion from civil war and allowed the latter as just resistance to the ruler of a state.[41] Vattel, perhaps the most liberal on this issue of the well-known natural lawyers, recognized an open-ended right of a nation to depose a tyrant.[42] None of these writers had established an overarching principle behind their conclusions, and their arguments had something of an *ad hoc* quality. As Vattel put it, although it is clear that no one should obey commands that are clearly contrary to natural law, "it is a more difficult matter to decide in what cases a subject may not only refuse to obey but even resist the sovereign and meet force with force".[43]

Kant's principle of "publicity," on the other hand, makes short work of the right of rebellion. If it "were publicly acknowledged, it would defeat its own purpose", he argues. Kant does not mean that it would defeat the purpose of rebellion, but that implicit in the purpose of setting up a right of rebellion is that there should be a state in the first place, and the division of authority created by a right of rebellion makes the existence of the state as a state "impossible". In this Kant was evidently following Hobbes. His point was that a right of rebellion means that there is no final authority short of violence (8:382, cf. 6:319ff.).

On the other hand, Kant points out, the ruler has no need to keep secret his right to punish rebellion. If he has the power--and he must by definition, or he is not the ruler--then he has nothing to fear from making his intentions public. Therefore, according to Kant, his maxims must be legitimate (8:382-3).

Kant's argument does not entirely deny comfort to the rebellious, however. It is "perfectly consistent with this argument that if the people were to rebel successfully, the head of state would revert to the position of a subject... [and] he would not be justified in starting a new rebellion to restore his former position" (8:383). There is no right to rebellion; but, as Hume had acknowledged, a successful rebellion creates its own rights. The rights of a

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[40] Pufendorf, *The Law of Nature and Nations*, trans. Kennet, Section VII.VIII.

[41] Wolff, *Jus Gentium Methodo Scientifica Pertractatum*, trans. Drake, Section 1012.

[42] Vattel, *The Law of Nations or the Principles of Natural Law*, trans. Fenwick, 3:23, cf. 3:25.

[43] Vattel, *Law of Nations*, 3:26.

successful rebellion can be publicly admitted without inordinately encouraging rebellions, Kant thinks, because the rebel still has to acknowledge that what he is doing is not yet right, and only success will save him from punishment.

In matters of international relations the principle of publicity also provides solutions. The natural lawyers had followed the authority of the Roman lawyers Pedius and Ulpian in elaborating a distinction between personal and real treaties to defeat claims that a king who signs a treaty does not bind his country.[44] Kant simply argued that if a ruler's intention that his signature would not bind his country was made public, other countries would not rely on his engagements (8:383-4).

Grotius had held that a state does not have the right to invade another solely because the other is growing in strength and may someday threaten its neighbors, and Pufendorf agreed.[45] Wolff agreed but added that if any such nation should "manifestly be considering plans for subjecting other nations to itself, these ought to provide for their common security by alliances, and the slightest wrong gives them the right to overthrow the growing power by armed force".[46] Vattel agreed that of itself, the growth of another nation could not justify an invasion, but the responsibility for defense of a country was a heavy one and required extreme caution. One could not afford to wait until it was too late. The "first appearances [of a desire of domineering on the part of a neighboring country] may be taken as a sufficient proof" and justify countermeasures.[47] Obviously, the right to invade in such cases could virtually be taken for granted.

Kant's approach was different. If a right to invade growing countries were to be made public, it would be counterproductive. Countries that were growing would anticipate such measures by alliances with their neighbors in accordance with the principle of "divide and conquer", he wrote (8:384). Therefore no such right

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[44] Grotius, *War and Peace*, Section II.LXf.; Vattel, *Law of Nations*, 3:170; Achenwall, *Ius Naturalis, Pars Posterior*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 19, Section 240.

[45] Grotius, *War and Peace*, Sections II.XIV, II.CXVIII; Pufendorf, *Law of Nature*, Section VIII.VI.5.

[46] Wolff, *Jus Gentium*, Section 650.

[47] Vattel, *Law of Nations*, 3:249; cf. Achenwall, *Ius Naturalis*, Section 265.

could be legitimate.

A third question that Kant raised was the right of a larger state to annex a smaller state to round off its territories. The natural lawyers mentioned above did not address the issue directly, although it would perhaps fall under their proscriptions of the right to go to war for pure utility or advantage.[48] Grotius specifically criticized the German tribes cited by Tacitus who went to war for better lands.[49] If the justification for such annexation is security, presumably it would have been treated much as the invasion of growing states discussed above. But for Kant, again, the resolution is easy, in accordance with the principle of publicity. If the maxim of annexation of smaller states were made public, smaller states would immediately unite to resist the larger states or ally themselves with other larger states for defense. Such a response would defeat the purpose of the right to annexation, and thus that right cannot be just (8:383).

"Publicity", it turns out, is also the key to the rightful organization of the international system. Politics and morality "can only be in agreement within a federal union" of states, Kant wrote. A federation provides a state of lawfulness without which no right can exist, without on the other hand stifling freedom, he argued. Again, like all of the conclusions drawn from the principle of publicity, this is "necessary and given a priori through the principles of right" (8:385).

"Publicity" is explicitly tied in with Kant's theory of the special role of philosophers. The "subterfuge of a secretive system of politics could... easily be defeated if philosophy were to make its maxims public, if only they dared allow the philosopher to expose his maxims through publicity" (8:386). That is, if philosophers are given free rein in their "publicity", injustice will not prevail.[50]

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[48] Pufendorf, *Law of Nature*, Section VIII.VI.5; Wolff, *Jus Gentium*, Section 645; Achenwall, *Ius Naturalis*, Section 264.

[49] Grotius, *War and Peace*, Section II.CIX.

[50] Kant reaffirmed the importance of "publicity" in "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?", written two years later. "Publicity" is the only way in which a people can present its grievances to its rulers. "A ban on publicity will therefore hinder a nation's progress", Kant writes (7:89). Thus Kant manages to insert the subversive notion of publicity into a doctrine that purports to call for no more than reform from the top down.

## 3. *Conclusion*

When Kant's writings are studied, it is usually from within the disciplines of philosophy or natural law. Kant "answers" Hume or improves on Grotius. When political matters are raised, Kant is found to be in dialogue with Rousseau or Hobbes, across the years and linguistic boundaries. This study, however, has examined contemporary German belle-lettres and political journalism as a context for Kant's political vocabulary. Names like Friedrich Just Riedel, Wilhelm Wekhrlin, and August Ludwig von Schlözer have appeared. We have found that Kant turned to their usage in developing a political vocabulary that was subversive for its time.

Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" reads like an occasional piece, a light-hearted, nontechnical paean to the values of the *Aufklärung*. Upon our contextual reading, however, we begin to see that its defense of freedom of expression and the public realm of the *Gelehrter* implicitly undermined absolutism and the conceptual tools of the lawyers who defended it. Kant's later use of the concept of "publicity" in *Toward Perpetual Peace* served some of the same subversive purposes, after events had forced him to reduce his reliance on the reading public.

Kant's usage was not a mere uncreative adoption of the usage of the men of letters and journalists of his time. He went beyond them by integrating their vocabulary into his systematic analyses of reason and its rights and giving it the cover of his philosophy. "Public" and "publicity" became such effective weapons for him precisely because he could use them in such a presumptively innocuous and noncontroversial way. Although it appeared on the surface that he was writing unobjectionable occasional pieces or elaborating schemes for perpetual peace based on abstract principles, he was actually subtly appropriating and legitimizing the vocabulary of opposition to the ruling princes. And, as we have seen in the foregoing chapter, it dovetailed nicely with his accommodation with the tradition of skepticism.[51]

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[51] Since the original appearance of this chapter in article form, several useful articles and books covering some of the same ground have appeared in German. See Hinske, "Pluralismus und Publikationsfreiheit im Denken Kants"; Bödeker, "Aufklärung als Kommunikationsprozeß"; Blesenkemper, *"Publice Age"- Studien zum Öffentlichkeitsbegriff bei Kant* [sic -Kant's mistake]. In English, see Schmidt,

# AFTERWORD

With Kant's subversive politics of publicity, we have come a long way from the possible political meanings of ancient skepticism. Taken together with some of the ideas of Montaigne and Hume, we now have many of the elements of a recognizably modern form of liberal political thought. These political ideas, as we have seen, were at least in part a product of the engagement of these authors with the tradition of epistemological skepticism.

There is much more to the story. In this Afterword, attention will be drawn to the need for more research in a number of areas. First, it should be emphasized that the full story of the influence of skepticism on political thought is much more complex and subtle than may appear from a quick reading of the foregoing book. On the way from ancient skepticism to Kant we have stopped only to look at Montaigne and Hume, although a large number of other figures from Augustine through Erasmus to Hobbes, Bayle, and d'Alembert were deeply influenced by the ancient skeptics. A closer study of the implications of their ideas for the history of political thought would be necessary to fill in the gaps and round out the picture sketched in this book.

Nor can this study even claim to provide a complete treatment of such matters as the relation to skepticism of Montaigne, Hume, and Kant. Much more could be said about each of these figures on skepticism and politics. For example, we have concentrated on the references to the skeptics in Kant's lectures and writings. But at least one other area that would require a monograph on its own would be a complete study of Kant's relations with contemporary skeptics like Maimon, Platner, "Aenesidemus" Schulze, and Wizenmann, and the implications of their work for political thought. Nothing of the kind is available in the literature.

And Kant's politics of publicity was certainly not the end of the history of the influence of philosophical skepticism on political ideas. Hegel and Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century and

"The Question of Enlightenment" and "What Enlightenment Was", and Reed, "Talking to Tyrants: Dialogues with Power in Eighteenth Century Germany".

Wittgenstein in the twentieth century are good candidates for further exploration of the nexus between skepticism and politics. The number of such candidates is apparently endless, especially since epistemological skepticism is now so pervasive in modern thought.

But it should never be forgotten that dogmatism is not yet dead, and that the skeptics can only be fully understood in the context of their opposition to dogmatism and dogmatists. For every Montaigne there was a more dogmatic Luther, Lipsius, or Charron; for every Hume, a more dogmatic Condorcet or Reid; for every Kant, a more dogmatic Bentham, Mill, or Marx; and for every recent skeptic, a recent dogmatist.

This latter point is relevant to the issue of the relationship between skepticism and liberalism. This book has explored the roots of liberal ideas in three early modern writers who drew these ideas out of skepticism concerning political matters. But there certainly have been, and still are, liberals who are liberal on dogmatic grounds. A very useful distinction among liberals can be made by dividing them into the two categories of skeptical liberals and dogmatic liberals. Then, perhaps, these two kinds of liberals can contend for the title of representing the most authentic, true liberalism. If Montaigne, Hume, and Kant have any authority as progenitors of true liberalism, then this book suggests that true liberalism must be a skeptical liberalism.

It bears repeating that this book was written as a history of ideas. It focuses on an identifiable tradition of epistemological skepticism derived from the ancient skeptics, and not on every possible skepticism. It was not written with the intention of positively recommending this tradition of skepticism, nor of recommending liberalism. It may be of just as much interest to anti-liberals or anti-skeptics as it is to liberals and skeptics, because it brings out some of the history of the ideas that they are fighting.

The sympathetic interpretation of some of the materials in this book may raise the suspicion that despite the foregoing denial the author actually does mean to recommend a skeptical liberalism. There are two answers to this suspicion. One is to admit that in fact the author is sympathetic to many of the ideas this book has reviewed. The other is that the author is also sympathetic to a number of political principles that can only be justified by dogmatic assertion. Thus, the author conceives of himself as participating in a stimulating and fruitful ongoing dialogue of partial agreement and

partial challenge to the thinkers studied in this book. That is surely one of the purposes of studying the history of ideas.

This book is intended to open up new vistas that make possible a new history of political thought. That history will recognize the profound impact of the tradition of epistemological skepticism on political thought. We have explored possible political meanings of the extant work of the ancient skeptics, followed by studies of the influence of skepticism on the political thought of Montaigne, Hume, and Kant. We have explored some of the evidence for the claim that some forms of modern liberalism are rooted in a variety of reactions to epistemological skepticism. It is now up to interested readers to make further contributions to this new history of political thought.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Part I of this bibliography lists the sources used for the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant, and explains the abbreviations that are used in the text and footnotes. Part II is a bibliography of other works cited.

## PART I

### 1. *The Ancients*

#### a. *Marcus Tullius Cicero*

The *Academica, De Natura Deorum, De Divinatione, De Re Publica, De Finibus*, and *De Legibus* are cited by standard book and section numbers. The following translations have been used, and are identified in the footnotes by the translator's name, volume, and page number:

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*Mathematicians*, and by standard book and section number. The following translations have been used, and are identified in the footnotes by the translator's name, volume, and page number.

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d. *Other ancient sources*

A number of other ancient and early church sources have been identified by standard book and section numbers. Most of the translations are drawn from A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols., Cambridge 1987.

2. *Montaigne*

Montaigne's works are identified by short title at the first reference in each chapter, and after that identified in the text by the following letters, with page numbers. Frame's translation has occasionally been modified.

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with volume and page numbers. The exception is the *Critique of Pure
Reason*, which is cited, as is customary in the literature, with an "A"
or a "B", indicating the first and second editions, and page number.

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# INDEX

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